SERMON APPLICATION IN SMALL PLACES:

A STUDY OF THE PRACTICE OF SERMON APPLICATION

IN THE SMALL TOWNS OF EASTERN CONNECTICUT

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To Calvary Chapel, Canterbury, Connecticut

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ABBREVIATIONS

BDAG	Bauer, Walter, Frederick William Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* 3d ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDB	Brown, Francis A., S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Revised ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1979.
HALOT	Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, eds. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Translated and edited by M. E. J. Richardson. Study Edition. 2 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2001.

ABSTRACT

The author examined the practice of sermon application in evangelical churches in the small towns of eastern Connecticut. He analyzed eighteen sermons by pastors serving there and interviewed those pastors about their approach to developing sermon applications. The preachers faced challenges of linking Scripture texts to applications, developing applications appropriate for their listeners' needs and cultural context, and developing applications with an appropriate level of specificity. The author concluded that the pastors' faithful practice was undergirded by evangelical convictions about the authority of Scripture and pastoral sensitivity to their listeners' needs and cultural context.

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

Introduction

One of the most difficult challenges for preachers is developing sermon application. Matt Woodley writes, "Based on my pastoral experience in four different churches, I have a clear winner for the hardest part of preaching—application."[1] Likewise, Bryan Chapell states, "The hard part [of preaching] is 'How do I make this real in people's lives? How do I make sure my application is right?' Application is what we never stop sweating."[2] Haddon Robinson writes, "Homileticians have not given accurate application the attention it deserves."[3] This thesis-project intends to give accurate application more attention. The goal of the project is to help preachers, especially those who pastor congregations in "small places" (to be defined later) in the United States, grow in developing sermon applications that are both biblically grounded and culturally relevant.

The original research is an exploration of how preachers in small places develop sermon applications in their current practice. This research has two components. The first is an examination of the applications in sermons preached by several pastors serving churches in small communities in eastern Connecticut. The second component consists of

1. Matt Woodley, "Introduction," in *Sermon Application,* ed. Matt Woodley (Carol Stream, IL: Preaching Today, undated e-book), 3, PDF edition. As of February 22, 2023, this article and the others (to be cited below) in the Preaching Today *Sermon Application* preaching guide were available for download and online at https://www.preachingtoday.com/preaching-guides/sermon-application/introduction.html.

2. Bryan Chapell, Haddon Robinson, and Joseph Stowell. "Apply Within," in *Sermon Application,* ed. Matt Woodley (Carol Stream, IL: Preaching Today, undated e-book), 21, PDF edition.

3. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 86.

semi-structured interviews with those pastors, in which they will relate their approach to developing sermon applications. After examining the sermons and conducting the interviews, I will offer a summary and description of the current practice of sermon application in this area. Furthermore, based on an evaluation of this research, I will offer suggestions for good practice for sermon application in small places.

The Need for this Study

As will be described below, preachers seeking to develop sermon applications face manifold challenges. The literature about homiletics gives some attention to these challenges. Preaching instructors have developed theories, models, and guides for sermon application.[4] Writers about preaching have shared their own experiences and struggles.[5] Many writers have offered critiques of sermons. They have found that some sermon applications are either untethered to the biblical text or unsuitable to the culture or the lived-experience of the listeners. As yet, however, the literature lacks a careful analysis of the current practice of developing sermon application for a particular cultural context.

This thesis-project contributes such an analysis to the field of homiletics. The study documents the content of sermon applications and the process by which those applications were developed by evangelical pastors working in a specific cultural setting—that of rural eastern Connecticut. The project seeks to answer the following principal questions:

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4. See Daniel Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon: How to Balance Biblical Integrity and Cultural Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); Jeffrey Arthurs, "The Fundamentals of Sermon Application" in *Interpretation and Application,* Craig Brian Larson, ed.*,* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 67-95; John Koessler, "Apply Your Message," in *Sermon Application,* ed. Matt Woodley (Carol Stream, IL: Preaching Today, undated e-book), 4-8, PDF edition.

5. For example, Steve Matthewson, "Using Images in Application," in *Sermon Application,* ed. Matt Woodley (Carol Stream, IL: Preaching Today, undated e-book), 11-13, PDF edition.

(1) What kinds of applications are presented in sermons by pastors of evangelical congregations in the small towns of eastern Connecticut?

(2) How do these pastors approach the task of developing sermon application in terms of linking the application to the Scripture text?

(3) What role does cultural context play in these sermon applications?

The Focus of the Research

A challenge of analyzing the current practice of sermon applications is that too much data exists for any researcher to consider. Thousands of sermons are preached every week. For this project, the data to be considered was limited as follows. First, since the study is intended to benefit evangelical pastors, the research focuses on preachers who share the evangelical conviction that the Bible is the inerrant Word of God.[6] Second, the project analyzes sermons delivered by pastors working in a narrow region of the United States, "small places" in eastern Connecticut. (The term "small places" will be defined below.) As such, the study is limited to sermons by pastors who serve in the same cultural setting. The study included only eighteen sermons by local pastors and interviews with those same pastors. These limitations were intended to make the amount of data manageable and the analysis meaningful within a systematic study.

Why study the practice of sermon application in a particular cultural context? Sermon application concerns showing people how to live out the teaching of Scripture. John Stott famously writes that the preacher stands "between two worlds," the world of the

6. A belief in the Bible as the true Word of God is a hallmark of evangelicalism. See David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1930s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-4, 12-14.

Bible and the world of the listener. Each listener inhabits a particular cultural context with particular needs, values, languages, and patterns of life. The same is true for local churches, which stand in particular cultural contexts. Robinson writes, "We endeavor to bring the ancient world, the modern world, and our particular world together as we develop the sermon."[7] Applying the Scripture to one's life means applying it to life within a cultural context.

As preachers decide which application to make the focus of a sermon, a key factor to consider is the listeners' cultural context. Kim writes, "For preachers communicating in the twenty-first century, acquiring and utilizing cultural intelligence is really not optional: it is vital to our proclamation lest we accept being dreadfully irrelevant."[8] Believers in one cultural context would apply the same biblical principle differently than believers in another context. For example, applying the principle that followers of Christ ought to "obey God rather than people" (Acts 5:29) would look different for believers who attend a prominent historic church in Washington, D.C. than for believers in a Chinese house church. Furthermore, pastors in North America today must consider that various cultures may be represented in the same local church. Preachers who appreciate their listeners' cultural contexts can present compelling, relevant, and precise applications that listeners can understand and implement.

On the other hand, preachers consider other factors besides culture when developing sermon application. For example, preachers consider the listeners' spiritual

7. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 75.

8. Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 9.

needs and the stages of their spiritual development.[9] Are they new believers or seasoned saints? What temptations do they face? What are their fears? Preachers also tailor applications for specific occasions in the life of the congregation. Additional factors influencing sermon application include the preacher's theological convictions and denominational tradition. This study examines the role of culture in current practice among these other factors.

Small Places

This thesis-project focuses on the cultural context which Stephen Witmer calls "small places." Witmer writes, "[W]hen I refer to small places, I'm using the term in a nontechnical sense to refer to countryside and communities that are relatively small in population, influence, and economic power."[10] Witmer describes a spectrum running from small places to big places in terms of population size: from unincorporated townships, to small towns, to suburbs, to cities, to megacities. Generally, small places are those on the side of the spectrum with lower populations—rural communities and small towns. Witmer points out, though, that some places with small populations have outsized cultural or economic influence, while some places with large populations are neglected, impoverished, and without much cultural influence. As such, the term small places for Witmer is not a technical description of population size but more a description that "takes into account

9. Scott M. Gibson, *Preaching with a Plan: Sermon Strategies for Growing Mature Believers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2012), 72-81.

10. Stephen Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places: Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019), 22.

appearance, feel, and rhythm of life."[11] He quotes Brad Roth, who writes, "Rural identity has more to do with how rural people experience the world."[12]

This thesis-project will borrow Witmer's term "small places" to refer to small towns and rural communities with their cultures and rhythms of life. A distinctive feature of the culture of small places is a connection to the land, even though today many people in small places do not work in agriculture. As will be noted in later chapters, cultural values in small places include the importance of family, tradition, self-reliance, and a cultural (and often political) conservatism.

Eastern Connecticut is one of those small places. The region makes up part of "The Last Green Valley," the mostly rural region of the Quinebaug and Shetucket River Valleys. In 1994, Congress designated The Last Green Valley National Heritage Corridor, a distinctive green pocket within the urban corridor between Washington, D.C. and Boston. Although bordered by midsized cities—Worcester, Massachusetts, to the north, Hartford to the west, Providence to the east, and Norwich and New London, Connecticut, to the south—the Last Green Valley region consists of small towns and has maintained its rural character.[13] Visitors here note its open spaces, both farmland and forests, dotted by village centers with colonial-style homes and churches with white steeples. Stone fences border highways and divide cornfields. Municipal services are scarcer here than in cities—many residents drink

11. Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places,* 25.

12. Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017), 27.

13. See thelastgreenvalley.org and especially the article, "Statement of Distinction: Why is it Green?" by retired National Park Service historian Larry Lowenthal (https://thelastgreenvalley.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Statement-of-Distinction.pdf).

water pumped from their own wells, and they carry their trash in their own pickup trucks to the town dump or transfer station.

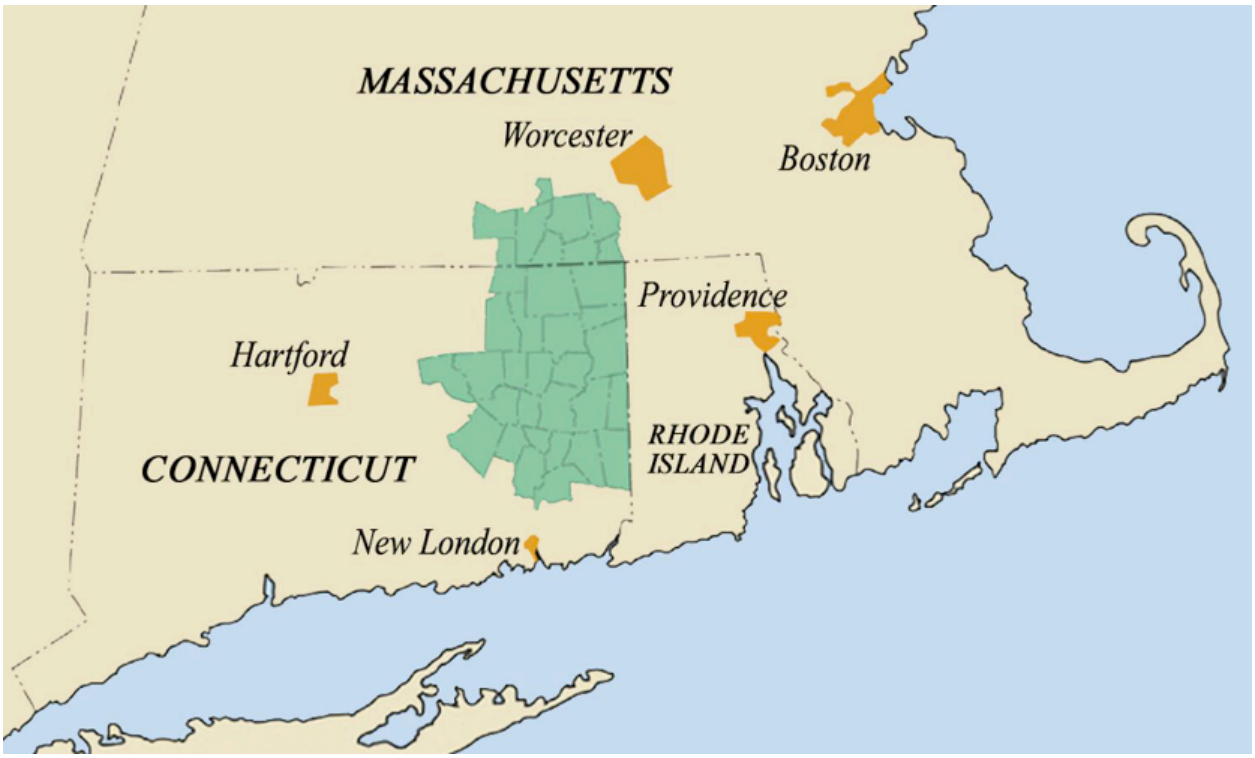

Figure 1: Map of the Last Green Valley. *Source: thelastgreenvalley.org.*

Rural eastern Connecticut has a distinctive regional culture, but its culture resembles that of small places elsewhere in New England and, more broadly, small places across the United States. While this thesis-project focuses on the small towns of eastern Connecticut, the findings should prove relevant and easily adaptable for preachers serving in small places elsewhere.

Recent years have seen a renewed interest among evangelicals in rural ministry. Witmer mentions several conferences, ministries, and networks focused on rural ministry which have recently formed or gained increased visibility: Small Town Jesus, the Acts 29 Rural Collective, Vinyard's Small Town USA initiative, the Rural Home Missionary

Association, Village Missions, and Small Town Summits.[14] Many recent books and articles highlight the importance of rural ministry or focus on aspects of it, such as counseling, pastoral ministry, theology, and missions.[15] However, little has been written recently about homiletics in a rural setting. As such, this project offers a contribution to the revitalized conversation about rural ministry.

Application Defined

The notion of "application" of the Bible is not exclusive to the field of preaching. The concept appears also in works about Bible study methods. Over many decades at Dallas Theological Seminary, Howard Hendricks developed and taught a three-step model of Bible study methodology: observation, interpretation, and application.[16] He describes his model in *Living By the Book,* co-authored with his son, William.

The first step, observation, involves asking the question "What do I see?"[17] The reader of the Bible examines the language used in the text, taking note of key terms, cause-and-effect relationships, the setting, the characters, and the context of the passage within the book. The reader observes the literary structure and relationships in the text such as

14. Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places*, 21.

15. For example, Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places*; Roth, *God's Country;* Glenn Daman, *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago: Moody, 2018); Donnie Griggs, *Small-Town Jesus: Taking the Gospel Mission Seriously in Seemingly Unimportant Places* (Damascus, MD: Evertruth, 2016).

16. Hendricks simplified the four-step model developed by Robert A. Traina: observation, interpretation, evaluation, application. See Robert A. Traina, *Methodical Bible Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1952, 1980). Hendricks notes his debt to Traina in his endorsement on the back cover of *Methodical Bible Study*.

17. Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living By the Book* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 47.

repetition, contrast, and proportion. Hendricks recommends writing notes of observations and creating charts or diagrams that encapsulate what the text says.

The second step, interpretation, involves asking the question, "What does it mean?" This second step necessarily follows the first; interpretation must be based on what the biblical text actually says. The meaning the reader seeks to identify is the original author's intended meaning.[18] A vast distance spans from the Bible's original authors to modern readers. Barriers of geography, language, culture, and literary genre stand in the way and obscure the meaning. However, such barriers can be largely overcome by historical-grammatical study. Average readers can learn to interpret Bible passages in their literary, historical, cultural, geographical, and theological contexts. Furthermore, expert scholarship is available to average readers in atlases, Bible dictionaries and handbooks, commentaries, and language tools.[19]

The third step, application, involves asking the question, "How does this work?" Once the Bible student understands what a biblical text means, application involves putting the biblical truth into practice. Application is seeking to live in light of the biblical truth. Hendricks writes, "The Bible was not written to satisfy your curiosity; it was written to transform your life. The ultimate goal of Bible study then, is not to do something to the Bible, but to allow the Bible to do something to you, so truth becomes tangent to life."[20] Hendricks writes that while a Bible passage has only one correct interpretation, the original author's intended meaning, there are many possible applications. From the

18. Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living By the Book*, 197.

19. Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living By the Book,* 201.

20. Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living By the Book*, 284.

specifics of the Bible passage, the reader can derive a general principle, a statement of a universal truth. That principle can be applied in many situations in many ways. The Bible "tells us the fundamental truths or principles that God wants us to apply across the entire range of human need."[21]

The concept of application is of paramount importance in homiletics. Addressing preachers in training, Robinson writes, "While it is essential that you explain the truth of a passage, your task is not finished until you relate that passage to the experience of your hearers. Ultimately the man or woman in the pew hopes that you will answer the questions, 'So what? What difference does it make?'"[22] Arthurs writes, "Application in a sermon takes the 'theory' of the Word and brings into contact with the listeners' hearts to produce change of behavior."[23] Overdorf posits that sermon application can take the form of either explanation or demonstration. The preacher can make "a straightforward explanation of how biblical teaching should impact lives," or the preacher "might demonstrate, by means of real-to-life illustration, how biblical teaching should impact listeners' lives."[24]

Challenges of Developing Sermon Application

Evangelical pastors desire for their congregations to hear God's Word in their sermons. They want listeners to understand both what the Scripture text originally meant and how to live now in its light. As they craft sermons toward those ends, many pastors feel more confident in Bible exegesis than in developing application.

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21. Hendricks and Hendricks, *Living By the Book,* 317.

22. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 86.

23. Arthurs, "The Fundamentals of Sermon Application," 69.

24. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon*, 21, 24.

Seminary training provides tools and models for the exegesis and interpretation of biblical texts. Preachers learn to translate from the original languages. Word study helps preachers discover the semantic range of a word and narrow down the meaning in its context. We discover literary themes and trace the logic of arguments. We note the cultural and historical setting. We consult scholarly commentaries to help confirm our exegesis or discover where our interpretation differs from the prevailing views. At the end of all this work, we feel fairly confident that we understand the original author's meaning.

Once that work is done, however, finding appropriate sermon applications is a weekly challenge. We often struggle to turn to our congregations and say, "This is what God wants you to do this week." When we do make such declarations, we face the great danger of misapplying God's Word. Robinson writes, "More heresy is preached in application than in Bible exegesis."[25]

Overdorf identifies seven mistakes that preachers make in application. He writes that these "land mines represent application heresies that explode from pulpits when preachers put applications into God's mouth that neither He nor the human authors of His texts intended."[26] These "land mines" are:

> 1. *Spiritualizing:* turning the physical realities of a biblical text into unwarranted spiritual analogies and applications.
> 2. *Moralizing:* drawing moral exhortations from a text that go beyond the text's intentions.
> 3. *Patternizing:* turning biblical descriptions of people or events into universally normative prescriptions for behavior.
> 4. *Trivializing:* offering applications that diminish the gravity and complexity of the gospel.

25. Haddon Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," in *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators,* Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 306.

26. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon,* 74.

> 5. *Normalizing:* implying that a biblical passage applies in the same manner to every person, despite differing circumstances.
> 6. *Proof-texting:* beginning with an application and then using various verses removed from their biblical contexts to support that application.
> 7. *Promising the Unpromised:* guaranteeing listeners certain outcomes that biblical teaching does not truly assure.[27]

Arthurs likewise describes five "stumbling blocks," common mistakes in application that preachers should avoid. First, preachers should avoid an "undiscerning emphasis on felt needs." He writes, "When felt needs are the preacher's primary concern, he or she starts with the audience, then scrambles around the pages of Scripture for verses that seem to address the topic, and ends up with an exegesis-thin, theology-lite sermon." Second, preachers should avoid a "dogged commitment to the metanarrative," such that the history of redemption is always emphasized to the neglect of distinctive features of particular texts. Third, preachers should avoid "unwarranted imagination," whereby they would turn "physical realities of biblical narratives into devotional analogies that do not align with the author's intention or the primary theology of the text." Like Overdorf, Arthurs also warns preachers against "unintentional moralizing" and "simplistic patternizing."[28]

Similarly, Helm describes mistakes that preachers make as they seek to apply the biblical text to their listener's cultural contexts. In Helm's view, many preachers make the mistake of "blind adherence" to the contemporary cultural context. Out of a healthy desire to move the mission of the church forward, preachers focus in their sermon preparation on creativity, artistry, and relevance, to the neglect of studying the meaning of the biblical text. This "blind adherence" can lead to "impressionistic preaching," based on the preacher's

27. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon,* 99.

28. Arthurs, "The Fundamentals of Sermon Application," 77-81.

vague impressions on how the biblical text connects to the listeners' needs, although more careful study would reveal that the biblical text has a different main point. "Blind adherence" can also lead to "inebriated preaching," whereby the preacher uses the biblical text, as the saying goes, as a drunk uses a lamp post—more for support than illumination. The pastor uses the Bible to prop up what he thinks needs to be said. In addition, Helm critiques what he calls "inspired preaching," in which the preacher proclaims not the message of the Bible text, but rather a message that the preacher discerned while reading the text during personal devotions. Although such sermons sound very spiritual, the point of the sermon might only be loosely connected to the point of the biblical text.[29]

As these writers note, preachers can make a variety of mistakes while seeking to apply God's Word. The challenges of sermon application, of course, go beyond avoiding mistakes. These challenges can be described in the following broad categories, which will be introduced below: philosophical objections to application, the challenge to include application, the challenge of biblical integrity, the challenge of contextualization, and the challenge of specificity.

Philosophical objections to application. Some preachers avoid including application in their sermons because they hold a philosophical objection to it, or they worry that their listeners do. Postmodern thought has left a mark on the cultural ethos, even if few pastors or church members read Derrida or Foucault. Preachers speak to listeners who assume that truth claims are subjective and moral standards are relative. Isn't it pushy to tell a crowd how to live or what to believe? Isn't it arrogant and oppressive to impose one's own views on another?

29. David R. Helm, *Expositional Preaching: How We Speak God's Word Today* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 15-37.

The preachers of the New Homiletic (which will be further explored in Chapter 3) sought to develop a form of preaching appropriate for the postmodern context. They reacted against a style of preaching that they believed was too preachy. Rather than offering firm conclusions about the meaning of the Bible or commanding people how to live, they used the sermon to create experiences and tell stories. Preachers should preach, as the title of one of Fred Craddock's books says, *As One Without Authority*. The New Homiletic had more influence in mainline church traditions than in conservative evangelicalism. Even so, the postmodern ethos can likewise tempt evangelical pastors to avoid or temper sermon application.

The challenge to include application. Evangelicals believe that the Bible is authoritative. Not only is the Scripture true; it is to be obeyed. Many evangelical preachers, however, offer little in the way of application. Why might this be the case? Some evangelical pastors use sermons mainly to teach doctrine. Although they believe that their listeners should apply the Scripture, they may not describe how to do so in the sermon. In other cases, the preacher may be unsure of how the Scripture should be applied, and so they leave the work of application to the listener and the Holy Spirit. The sermon explains the passage and illustrations illuminate aspects of it. Then, the sermon closes with a prayer: "May the Holy Spirit apply these truths to our hearts and lives." Robinson observes that such preaching betrays a preacher who "does not have a ghost of a guess as to how the biblical content might change people."[30]

Carter, Duvall, and Hays write that their preaching students at a conservative Baptist university often struggle to include application in their sermons. They write, "Often

30. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 28.

they seem reluctant to take the final step and drive home the application of the text." Some of those student preachers struggle with sermon application "because they have difficulty identifying spiritual principles from the Bible and integrating them into their own life experience. Thus it is difficult for them to apply the Bible to others." In addition, "some of our students assume that application is the sole responsibility of the Holy Spirit," not the preacher. Furthermore, some preachers eschew application because they "want to avoid sounding legalistic."[31] Therefore, a need exists to bolster the confidence of evangelical preachers to include application in their sermons.

The challenge of biblical integrity. When preachers dare to venture into application, they face the challenge of biblical integrity. How can a preacher have confidence that the applications proclaimed from the pulpit are truly what God wants the congregation to do? As noted by the writers mentioned above, a common mistake preachers make is presenting an application untethered from the Scripture. For example, a preacher addressed a group of ministry leaders at a conference with a sermon based on Luke 13:6-9. In Jesus' parable, a farmer's fig tree produces no fruit for three years running. The farmer tells his servant to cut down the tree. The servant suggests waiting another year to give him a chance to fertilize the tree. If the tree still produced no fruit after another year, then he would cut it down. In the sermon at the ministry conference, the preacher told his listeners to make sure they were being "fertilized" by meeting regularly with a small group of friends. He said that the accountability and refreshment they would receive in the small group would help them be "fruitful" in their ministries.

31. Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God's Word: A Hand-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 117.

Very likely the preacher suspected that the ministry leaders in his audience were susceptible to loneliness and exhaustion, and so he looked for a Bible text to support his idea to encourage them to join a small group. His advice is not bad advice. Most ministry leaders could benefit from being in a small group. But does that application flow from Luke 13:6-9? In the context of the passage, Jesus warns his listeners to repent before it was too late, lest they fall under God's judgment (Luke 13:5). The preacher missed this context and the passage's main theme, and he mistakenly assumed it supported the application he wanted to make. Other Bible texts lead to an application about small groups, but Luke 13:6-9 should lead to an application about repentance. As this example illustrates, legitimately bridging Scripture text to application presents a difficult challenge.

The challenge of contextualization. Another challenge for the preacher with regard to application is contextualization. The preacher should develop application that addresses the actual needs of the listeners in their cultural context. Kim writes, "[O]ffering tailor-made applications for a specific cultural context may prove challenging for many preachers. The vacuum of relevant and textually faithful application has persisted for too long."[32] Helm rightly notes that preachers, out of a healthy desire to contextualize, can make the mistake of neglecting the original meaning of the biblical text. However, the opposite problem also exists. Preachers can neglect or misunderstand the cultural context of their listeners. As a result, their listeners might misunderstand the sermon. The listeners might also attempt to apply the Scriptures in ways that are inappropriate in their cultural context. Another result of a preacher failing to understand the cultural context of the listeners is that the suggested application does not touch on the listeners' lived experience.

32. Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence,* 26.

Pastors addressing their own congregations typically know their listeners' life situations and needs. Even so, preaching is a cross-cultural ministry. The pastor may not have grown up in the same cultural context. Furthermore, the pastor's life experience differs from that of the listeners, if only in that pastoral ministry is a unique vocation with an unusual rhythm of life. In addition, many North American congregations today are comprised of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds and identities. Improved appreciation for the cultural contexts of the listeners can enhance a pastor's preaching, especially in the area of application.

The challenge of specificity. A final challenge of sermon application is the challenge of specificity. How general or specific should the sermon application be? Preachers face the options of developing applications for all of humanity, for people in a certain country, for people in a certain town or neighborhood, or for people who share some other sense of identity. Within a local church, the pastor might develop applications for all the members, for a segment of the church (such as the high school students, the mothers, immigrants, those of the majority ethnicity, those who have recently lost loved ones, etc.), or even for certain individuals.[33] How does a pastor decide whom the application should target in each sermon? Factors influencing the decision include the Bible passage, the needs of the congregation, and pastoral wisdom. The challenge of specificity involves conscientiously considering the interplay of these factors.

33. See Joseph R. Jeter, Jr. and Ronald J. Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002); and James R. Neiman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).

Project Goals and Overview

This project is intended to help preachers who work in the small towns and rural areas of eastern Connecticut and, more broadly, similar communities across North America, face the challenges of sermon application. An examination of the current practice of sermon application could lead to better understanding and improved praxis. It is hoped that this project would bolster the confidence of preachers to include sermon applications. In addition, this study seeks to help preachers in small places gain confidence to move competently from Scripture text to sermon application in their cultural context. It is also hoped that this study would help preachers grow in their understanding of this cultural context and become more intentional in developing sermon applications that take culture into account.

The thesis-project will take the following shape. Chapter 2 will examine biblical and theological foundations related to application in preaching. The chapter will begin by presenting evangelical convictions about Scripture. Next will be a survey of preaching in the Bible, giving special attention to application. Key Scripture passages dealing with application in preaching will be closely examined. The chapter will then situate sermon application within a model of expository preaching.

Chapter 3 will review the literature about sermon application. The chapter will examine the topic of sermon application within general works about homiletics, including the textbooks most commonly used in evangelical seminaries and other significant works by evangelical preachers. In addition to general works about preaching, the chapter will review works devoted to sermon application, including *Truth Applied* by Jay E. Adams, *Applying the Sermon* by Daniel Overdorf, and *The Heart is the Target: Preaching Practical*

Application from Every Text by Murray Capill. The chapter will conclude with a description of rural and small town culture in the United States, drawing from recent literature about ministry in small places. The goal of this section is to identify elements of the culture of small places relevant for crafting sermon application.

Chapter 4 will set forth the design of the original research project, an examination of the current practice of sermon application among evangelical pastors in small places in eastern Connecticut. The research has two stages. The first stage is an analysis of the applications made in eighteen sermons delivered by pastors of evangelical churches in rural eastern Connecticut. The second stage is semi-structured interviews of those same pastors. The pastors were asked to describe how they develop the applications in their sermons. They were also prompted to share their perceptions of which elements of their cultural context are most important to understand in crafting sermon application for congregations in such small places.

Chapter 5 will present the results of the original research. The applications of the sermons will be summarized and analyzed in terms how they relate to the Scripture text and to the cultural context. The pastors' answers in the interviews will also be summarized. The chapter will present how the pastors describe their own approach to developing sermon application, especially in how they link the applications to the Scripture texts. The chapter will also summarize how the pastors consider their cultural context in crafting sermon application. Based on the research, the chapter will offer some conclusions and proposals for good practice of sermon application in small places.

Conclusion

Having described the challenges of sermon application, which involves bringing the truths of Scripture into a specific cultural setting, and having chosen one such setting—the small places of eastern Connecticut, we will seek to learn how pastors here are facing the challenges. Before doing so, we should hear the divine call to apply God's Word in preaching. The biblical and theological foundations of sermon application are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

This chapter presents biblical and theological foundations for sermon application. First, evangelical convictions about Scripture will be summarized. Next, sermon application in the Bible will be explored. This exploration will consist of a survey of preaching in the Bible and an examination of four key biblical texts involving sermon application. Finally, sermon application will be situated within a model of expository preaching.

The Nature of Scripture

In sermon application, a preacher calls listeners to respond to a biblical concept. Thus, a key theological foundation for sermon application is one's conviction about the nature and function of the Bible, the written Word of God.[1] When it comes to the nature of Scripture, evangelicals accept the Bible's designation of itself as inspired by God, inerrant, authoritative, sufficient, necessary, and understandable.

Inspired by God. An evangelical model of sermon application begins with the conviction that the Bible is God's revealed Word in written form. Evangelicals accept the Bible's repeated self-designation as "the Word of the Lord" and "the Word of God." Two key texts about the nature of Scripture are 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:20-21. In the first, Paul writes, "All Scripture is inspired by God." The Greek word for "inspired" can be rendered literally as "breathed out by God." The words of Scripture, then, are God's own, just as

1. The categories in this section are typical of standard evangelical works of systematic theology, such as those by Berkhof, Erickson, and Grudem.

though He spoke them by his own breath. In the second text, Peter writes, "No prophecy of Scripture comes from the prophet's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man; instead, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." When human authors composed the Scriptures, they employed their own languages, personalities, and writing styles. Yet God superintended the composition so that the authors wrote what he wanted them to write.

Inerrant. Since the Holy Spirit of God is the author of Scripture, and God does not lie, then the Scripture is true. Jesus testifies that God's Word "is truth" (John 17:17) and that "Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35). Scripture is true, in the sense that it is reliable and in the sense that its statements correspond to reality, not only in a religious or spiritual sense, but also that it is historically accurate. The apostles invite their readers to verify their claims by consulting eyewitnesses to the events they describe (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:6). Paul writes that not just some parts but "*all* Scripture is inspired by God" (2 Timothy 3:16). As such, it is appropriate to describe the Scripture as inerrant in the autographs.

Authoritative. The Scripture, as God's Word, has authority. God's Word stands in judgment over people, and it declares what is true over and against what is false. Scripture, above both tradition and experience, is the final authority for Christian faith and practice. Furthermore, although some preachers claim to have received additional revelation beyond the Scriptures from the Holy Spirit, we should not think of the Holy Spirit as an authority who supersedes or contradicts the words of Scripture. The Holy Spirit's revelation is to be discerned in the words of the Bible, over unreliable human experience.

Sufficient. The Bible is sufficient in that it contains all the information needed for a person to be saved. Setting forth the purpose of his Gospel, John states, "These are written

so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31). Likewise, the Bible contains all the information necessary for Christians to live in accordance with God's calling. "Sanctify them by your truth," Jesus said. "Your Word is truth" (John 17:17). Related to the sufficiency of Scripture is the notion that the canon of Scripture is complete. The sixty-six canonical books of the Bible are the sum total of God's written special revelation (Revelation 22:18-19).

Necessary. General revelation is insufficient for salvation. People can come to believe that God exists through observing creation and applying reason, and as such they stand before God without excuse for sin (Romans 1:20). However, special revelation—through God's Word and his Son—is necessary for people to come to faith in Christ and to be saved (Romans 3:21-26). Apart from trusting in the message about Christ found in Scripture, a person cannot be saved (Romans 10:17).

Understandable. Finally, the Bible has perspicuity or clarity. The Bible is, in general, written in plain language. It is not so opaque or mysterious that its essential doctrines are unintelligible. Though some sections are difficult, the Bible can be understood using the same means of interpretation employed for other books. "Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105). Its essential teachings are clear, and obscure passages can be interpreted in light of clearer passages.

The Function of Scripture

Having described the character of the Bible, we turn now to its function, to what the Bible does. God uses his Word to accomplish his will.

Reveals. The Scripture reveals God's message to people. In speaking to us through the prophets and apostles, God describes and explains his acts in creation and in history. Many truths revealed in God's Word could not be known simply by observing God's acts. God's Word reveals our sin, God's character, and his salvation through Christ.

Preserves. By causing his Word to be written, God preserved his message so that people all around the world and through the centuries can know it. Written documents preserve a message more accurately than fallible memories. By allowing his Word to be written, God allows people to return repeatedly to his message, study it, let their understanding be shaped by it, and transmit it to others.

Speaks. Through his written Word, God speaks to its readers or hearers in the present. The author of Hebrews, quoting from Psalm 95, claims that the Holy Spirit is speaking through that Scripture even "today" (Hebrews 3:7). Furthermore, the Word of God is "living and active" (Hebrews 4:12). As we read the Bible, God speaks to us, stands in judgment over us, and even reveals our hidden thoughts and motives.

Acts. The Bible shows that God acts through his Word. With his spoken words, God creates worlds (Hebrews 11:3) and heals the sick (Psalm 107:20). God also acts through his written Word, the Bible. God's Word testifies of Jesus. When people hear the message about Jesus and believe it, God grants them spiritual life. Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life" (John 5:24).

Implications for Sermon Application. The concern for a legitimate bridge between the biblical text and contemporary sermon application arises for evangelical preachers who hold that the Bible is the true Word of God. Preachers who do not hold such

convictions are less concerned with grounding sermon application in the biblical text. For them, the biblical text contains errors and does not carry the weight of God's authority, so sermon applications might just as well flow from other sources. Evangelical preachers, however, desire for sermon applications to flow legitimately from the Scripture. What makes a "legitimate" bridge from the Scripture to a contemporary context is a complex question and one that this thesis-project will explore.

Furthermore, evangelicals look to the Scripture itself for a model of sermon application, in providing both principles and examples. Preaching in the Bible is the subject of the next sections. We first will survey briefly preaching in the Bible and then examine more deeply four key biblical texts about sermon application.

Preaching in the Bible

Having summarized evangelical convictions about Scripture, we now turn to biblical foundations for sermon application. The Bible contains many examples of preaching and similar proclamations of God's Word. In our era, after the completion of the biblical canon, preaching is a proclamation of God's Word as revealed in the Bible or a portion of it. In this sort of preaching, known as expository or expositional preaching, the sermon re-proclaims an older message found in the Scripture. In many of the examples of preaching in the Bible, however, the preacher received his message from God in some unwritten form, so the sermon does not exposit a text. Still, these antecedents shape our model of sermon application in expository preaching.

Preaching in the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets spoke as forerunners to Christian preachers. They declared a message received from God. Moses,

called a prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10), delivered God's message to Pharaoh and God's Law to his people, not only in written form but also aloud. The Book of Deuteronomy is structured as a series of speeches or sermons that Moses delivered to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land. Prophets such as Nathan and Elijah spoke messages from God to Israel's kings. "Thus says the Lord" frequently introduces oracles in the prophetic books. Much of the material written in the prophetic books was delivered aloud, whether in a royal court (as Isaiah) or to a group in Israel (as Micah) or even to a group in a foreign nation (as Jonah). The content of the prophetic messages varied. Some contained instructions about how God wanted people to live. Others threatened impending judgment. Others promised God's restoration of his people to the land after their exile. Some prophecies pointed to the future Messiah.

In addition to such prophecies, other examples of preaching and teaching in the Old Testament involve the exposition of Scripture. God instructed the Israelites to continually proclaim his Law to each other. "These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7). Levitical priests were tasked with teaching God's instructions to the nation (Deuteronomy 33:10). An example of expositional preaching in Nehemiah 8 will be discussed in detail below.

Preaching in the New Testament. New Testament examples also shape our understanding of preaching. Preaching features prominently in the Gospels. John the Baptist's preaching follows the model of the Old Testament prophets. He warns of God's impending judgment of sin, calls on people to repent, and points them to the coming

Messiah (Matthew 3:1-12). Preaching is a main aspect of Jesus' public ministry (Mark 1:39; Matthew 4:23). Matthew and Luke describe the content of Jesus' preaching as "the good news of the kingdom" (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Luke 8:1). Much of Jesus' preaching was not exposition of biblical texts, but his own parables and other original teaching. Unlike the teachers the people usually heard, Jesus taught "like one who had authority" (Matthew 7:29). However, Jesus also preached from the Scriptures. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, Jesus showed how common religious practice did not reflect a proper understanding of God's intention as revealed in the Mosaic Law (Matthew 5:17—6:4). In a sermon at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from Isaiah about the proclamation of good news in the Messianic Age, and he declared that the text was fulfilled by his own appearance (Luke 4:16-21). This theme of fulfillment is important in Jesus' use of Old Testament texts. For example, in his conversation with the disciples on the Emmaus Road after his resurrection, Jesus explains the testimony to himself in "all the Scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Jesus also sent out his disciples to preach (Mark 3:14). Their preaching before Jesus' death must have reflected his own in that they would have declared the good news of God's kingdom and highlighted Jesus' role in ushering it in. After his resurrection, Jesus commissioned the apostles to "make disciples," which included "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

In the Book of Acts, preaching plays a central role in the expansion of the church. Luke's account includes several of the apostles' sermons. The main feature of the apostles' preaching is that they recounted the historical events of Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and giving of the Holy Spirit, and they called on their listeners to repent and believe on Jesus. Apostolic preaching is "testimony" in that the apostles are testifying to the events that they

witnessed (Acts 1:8; 10:39-42). Similarly, Paul often incorporates into his preaching a testimony about his personal encounter with the risen Jesus (for example, Acts 22:6-16). The apostles' sermons frequently refer to Old Testament texts. They emphasize that those texts point toward the current time of fulfillment (such as Peter's quotation of Joel 2 in Acts 2:16-21) or that the promises or patterns of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus (for example, Peter's quotation of Psalm 16 in Acts 2:25-31). Nearly all preaching in Acts is evangelistic; the listeners do not yet believe in Christ, and the apostles call on them to believe. Some sermons include a rhetorical defense to government authorities or hostile crowds of the apostles' evangelistic activities. In addition, in Acts the apostles teach new converts to the faith (e.g., Acts 2:42). Such teaching was sometimes delivered in the form of a sermon, as when Paul addresses the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17-38).

The New Testament epistles, though not technically sermons, provide examples of the apostles' teaching to the new churches. The epistles contain both proclamations of what God has done through Christ (the "indicatives") and instructions for living in the light of gospel (the "imperatives"). The epistles also exemplify the ways the apostles handled the Old Testament Scriptures. They took care not to violate the texts' meaning in the original contexts, yet they always interpreted the texts in light of Jesus' death and resurrection. In the epistles, Old Testament texts bolster theological arguments and serve as moral examples. Certain Old Testament texts are used in more than one way, depending on the writer's argument and the needs of the readers. The writers of the epistles also consider the content of Jesus' teaching as God's revelation and apply it in various ways in different church contexts.

In their epistles, Paul and Peter refer to the preaching that they and others deliver and which the churches had received. The source of the apostles' message is God, and the subject matter is the good news about Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-3; Galatians 1:11-16). In the epistles, the content of preaching is described most frequently as "the good news" or "gospel" (e.g., Romans 1:15; 1 Peter 1:12). Its content is also variously described as "Jesus Christ" (Romans 16:25), "Christ" (Philippians 1:15), "Christ crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23), "the word" (1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 Peter 1:25), "the faith" (Galatians 1:23), "peace" (Ephesians 2:17), and "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Ephesians 3:8). Paul writes that it is necessary for people to hear the gospel preached in order to believe in Christ (Romans 10:14). It is assumed that the people in the churches have to come to faith through believing in the gospel that was preached to them (e.g., 1 Peter 1:25). The churches should continue to believe this same gospel rather than turning to the pseudo-gospels of false preachers (Galatians 1:8-9). Furthermore, God strengthens the church through preaching (Romans 16:25). Paul asserts that he endeavors to preach free of charge (1 Corinthians 9:18) and in territory where other Christian preachers have not already labored (Romans 15:20). Preaching in the Pastoral Epistles will be examined below.

Application in biblical preaching. This survey has shown that preaching in the Bible is an oral proclamation of a message that comes from God. Historically, the message may be one received directly from God or an exposition of a Scripture text. All biblical preaching includes application in that it calls on the hearers, either explicitly or implicitly, to respond. Within sermons in the Bible, the overarching application is a call to faith in God. Yet that faith should be demonstrated in action, and both general and specific appeals to action can be found in biblical sermons. After Jesus' death and resurrection, Christian

preachers focus predominantly on proclaiming the good news about him and calling on their listeners to believe it. This message is proclaimed both to unbelievers in order that they might believe and to believers so that they might be strengthened in the faith and not depart from it.

Nehemiah 7:73—8:12: An Example of Old Testament Expository Preaching

We will now examine closely four key passages that contribute to a solid biblical foundation for sermon application. The first, Nehemiah 7:73—8:12, provides an Old Testament example of Scripture exposition that leads into application in various spheres. The Levites lead a gathering of Jews who had returned to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon to apply a portion of the Mosaic Law in a new time and setting.

Gathering under the Word. Nehemiah, a Jewish official in the Persian court, was allowed to move to Jerusalem in 445 B.C. and was appointed governor. Nehemiah 1-7 describes how he led the Jews to organize themselves and rebuild the city walls, in spite of opposition from their neighbors. Next, Nehemiah 7:73—8:6 depicts an assembly in Jerusalem:

> When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people gathered together at the square in front of the Water Gate. They asked the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel. On the first day of the seventh month, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly of men, women, and all who could listen with understanding. While he was facing the square in front of the Water Gate, he read out of it from daybreak until noon before the men, the women, and those who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. The scribe Ezra stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose. Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah stood beside him on his right; to his left were Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah,

> Zechariah, and Meshullam. Ezra opened the book in full view of all the people, since he was elevated above everyone. As he opened it, all the people stood up. Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and with their hands uplifted all the people said, "Amen, Amen!" Then they knelt low and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

The congregation requested Ezra to bring "the book of the law of Moses that the LORD had given Israel." This depiction reflects how Israel regarded the Bible. First, it is written in a "book." Second, it is "law" or "Torah." The term "Torah," meaning "instruction," was used to refer to the Pentateuch and later to the Hebrew Scriptures generally, and it describes "guidance or direction from God to his people."[2] Breneman writes, "When Ezra read from the Book of the Law of Moses, the people took it as authoritative…There must have been a long-standing tradition behind its reading, for there is no evidence that they had to be convinced of its authority."[3] Third, the law is "of Moses." Critical scholarship limits or eliminates the involvement of a historical Moses in composing the Pentateuch. However, Nehemiah 8:1 designates Moses as the recipient of God's revelation, and it implies that Moses contributed to the Law's composition. Fourth, the law was given by "the LORD," the covenant-making and covenant-keeping God, and thus carries his authority. Finally, the law was given "to Israel." Such is the nature of Scripture: its authorship is both divine and human, its language is preserved in written form, and it is to be received by God's people as authoritative as they live in a covenant relationship with him.

Ezra read the Scripture to the assembly, twice described as both men and women. Further, the audience is "all who could listen with understanding" (v. 2) and "all those who

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2. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Torah," Ronald F. Youngblood, ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

3. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* New American Commentary 10 (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1993), 48.

could understand" (v. 3). God's Word is not so obscure that ordinary people cannot understand it. The people "listen attentively" as Ezra reads "from daybreak to noon." Interestingly, some effort went into the logistics of ensuring the reading was heard. Ezra "stood on a high wooden platform made for this purpose," flanked by leaders of the community. The people look up to the platform and see that Ezra's words are not his own but from the Scripture scroll. Thus, the assembly gathers, literally beneath the authority of God's Word, which they must hear so that they might understand it. Their posture, standing and kneeling, depicts worship and humble submission to the Scripture's authority.

Explaining the Word. Next, Nehemiah 8:7-8 shows that the Scripture was not only read but also explained to the people:

> Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiah, who were Levites, explained the law to the people as they stood in their places. They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read.

The Hebrew terms used to describe the Levites' teaching are significant. The verb translated "explained" (מְבִינִים) has the same root (בִּין) as the Qal participles describing the listeners as able to "understand" in verses 2 and 3. Here, in the Hifil, it has the meaning "give understanding" or "teach."[4] Three additional terms describe the way that the Levites explained the Scripture. First, the Levites "read out of the book of the law." "Read" (וַיִּקְרְאוּ) is the same verb that depicts Ezra's reading in verse 3. Assuming only one copy of the Scripture was available, the Levites might have taken turns reading from the platform. On the other hand, the Levites might have "recited" the Scripture to smaller groups within the

4. BDB, "בִּין," 107.

large assembly, another meaning of the verb.[5] Williamson writes, "[S]ince it is expressly stated that 'the people remained in their places,' there is a hint that the Levites in fact moved around. It is probable, therefore, that after each section of the Law had been read (cf. v 8), the Levites moved from group to group among the people making sure that all had understood what they had heard."[6] Second, the Levites were "translating" the Scripture. The Hebrew verb (פרשׁ) can mean "explain" or "distinguish," and in the Pual, as here, "to make an extempore translation of a text."[7] The Levites thus translated the biblical Hebrew, a language opaque to people who had grown up in Babylonia, into their contemporary Aramaic vernacular. Third, the Levites were "giving the meaning" of the Scripture. The noun translated "meaning" (שֶׂכֶל) is defined as "insight" or "understanding," and here conveys the sense "set forth (the) understanding (i.e. the meaning)."[8]

In summary, the Levites explained the Scripture by first reading (or reciting) the biblical text, then translating it into contemporary language, and next providing an exposition of the text which conveyed its meaning. The result was that the listeners "understood what was read."

Applying the Word. After Ezra had read the Scripture and the Levites had further read and explained it, Nehemiah 8:9-12 depicts the way the Scripture was applied:

> Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the
> Levites who were instructing the people said to all of them,
> "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep."
> For all the people were weeping as they heard the words of the

5. *HALOT,* "קרא," 2:1130.

6. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* Word Biblical Commentary 16 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 290.

7. *HALOT*, "פרשׁ," 2:967.

8. BDB, "שֶׂכֶל," 968.

> law. Then he said to them, "Go and eat what is rich, drink what is sweet, and send portions to those who have nothing prepared, since today is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, because the joy of the LORD is your strength." And the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, since today is holy. Don't grieve." Then all the people began to eat and drink, send portions, and have a great celebration, because they had understood the words that were explained to them.

Upon hearing the Scripture, the assembly begins weeping, because God's commands had not been obeyed. However, the leaders instruct the people not to weep, but rather to rejoice, because "this day is holy to the Lord." The people should celebrate a feast. Further, they are to "send portions," to deliver food and wine to the Jews who had not prepared for the festival or could not afford such supplies. It becomes clear that the assembly is to celebrate the Festival of Trumpets, prescribed in Leviticus 23:23-25 and Numbers 29:1-6 for the first day of the seventh month, Tishri. Those texts prescribe a sacred assembly, rest from work, special offerings, and trumpet blasts. Ezra must have included one or both of these texts in his reading, which formed the basis for the leaders' teaching. The Scripture calls for rejoicing on this "holy" day of the calendar. The people should rejoice, because "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Although they feel remorse for their sin, they should take comfort in God's grace to Israel.[9]

The people obey the instruction. They begin to celebrate the feast and to send food to others so that they could celebrate it, too. The passage concludes that the people obeyed

9. "'The joy of the Lord' was the joy each Israelite felt at these festivals as he identified himself afresh with the community of God's people and so appropriated in his own generation the salvation once bestowed upon his ancestors." Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah,* 292.

the instruction "because they had understood the words that had been explained to them."[10]

Thus, this clear example of Old Testament expositional preaching includes sermon application. The sermon takes a text written for one setting, as Moses prepared the Israelites to enter the Promised Land, and applies it in another setting, as Jewish settlers centuries later return to the Promised Land from exile and renew their worship. Although the text is brought into a new setting, the preachers are careful not to violate its original meaning. God's commands to Israel through Moses are to be obeyed in the current setting.

Interestingly, three spheres of application can be identified in this sermon. First, the listeners are to understand the Scripture. The Hebrew root בִּין (understand/cause to understand) is used five times in the passage, alongside other terms having to do with understanding. Second, an application is directed towards the listeners' emotions and attitudes. While the listeners are understandably grieved, the preachers call on them to instead rejoice, because the Mosaic Law designated that date for celebration. Third, another application calls the listeners to action. The listeners are to celebrate a feast and share it with their neighbors. Therefore, sermon application is directed towards the head (understanding), the heart (emotions and attitudes), and the hands (taking action).

10. Interestingly, there is no mention of trumpet blasts or sacrificial offerings. Perhaps in this period of scarce resources, practicing such rites was less feasible. On the other hand, perhaps such rites are implied, but their absence from the text reflects a shift in theological emphasis in this period. Breneman writes, "It is significant that this reading of the law and the worship service were not centered in the temple and not controlled by the priesthood. From this time on in Judaism, the Torah was more important than the temple." Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther,* 224.

Psalm 110:1 in Acts 2: An Example of New Testament Expository Preaching

An example of the apostles' exposition of the Old Testament is Peter's use of Psalm 110:1 in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts 2. Peter, without violating the original context of the psalm, interprets it in the light of the gospel events. In addition, Peter draws on his Christocentric interpretation of this text and others in order to make sermon application.

Before examining how Peter uses Psalm 110:1, it will be helpful to note its original context. Psalm 110 contains Yahweh's promise to Israel's Davidic king. The heading, part of the Hebrew text, designates it as "a psalm of David." The preposition prefixed to "David" can indicate that the psalm was written "for" David, "by" David, "dedicated to" David, "about" David, or "for the use of" David.[11] Plausibly, David wrote the psalm, and he may have presented Yahweh's promise in it to Solomon at his coronation, although the text does not indicate its occasion.[12] Verse 1 states, "This is the declaration of the LORD to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Thus, the LORD, Yahweh, makes a declaration to "my Lord," the Davidic king. Of the two terms translated "Lord," the second, while it can refer to God, often refers to human rulers as it does here.[13] Yahweh's command to the king to sit at his right hand is best understood as metaphoric language depicting the divine authority and divine blessing by which the Davidic king reigned in Israel.[14] "To make enemies a footstool" was a common expression in the Ancient Near East

11. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1—50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 33-34.

12. Craigie, *Psalm 1—50,* 35.

13. *HALOT*, אָדוֹן, 1:13:A.

14. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms,* transl. Timothy J. Hallett (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), 263-64.

for conquering enemies.[15] Thus, Yahweh promises that Israel's king will conquer his enemies, but he will do it under the authority of Yahweh and by his strength.

Peter addresses his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40) to a crowd in Jerusalem bewildered by the strange phenomenon of the apostles' speaking in tongues. He explains that the apostles are not drunk, as some assumed, but rather the phenomenon is a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy that in the last days God would pour out his Spirit on people and that they would prophesy. The time of eschatological fulfillment, the Day of the Lord, has come, portended by cosmic events and miracles, and those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Peter then proclaims the recent events that mark the turning of the age: Jesus' life, his death, and his resurrection. Peter references Psalm 16, which says that God's "holy one" would not "see decay," as pointing to Jesus' resurrection. Next Peter proclaims Jesus' ascension to the Father and explains that it is he, Jesus, who has poured out the Holy Spirit.

Further developing the theme of Jesus's ascension, Peter states that it "was not David who ascended into the heavens" (Acts 2:34). Rather, it was Jesus. Quoting Psalm 110:1, Peter explains, "he [David] himself says, 'The Lord declared to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool"'" (Acts 2:34-35). Peter's use of the psalm depends on Jesus' teaching. Jesus quoted the psalm to show that the Messiah is not merely David's son but also his lord (Luke 20:41-44). Peter likewise interprets the psalm as referring to one of David's descendants (Acts 2:30) and as one who is Lord (v. 36). Thus Peter interprets the first line of Psalm 110:1 as describing God's oracle to one who is

15. Egyptian iconography often portrays the Pharaoh sitting on his throne, his feet resting on a footstool composed of miniature enemies (or the weapons of his enemies) lying horizontally and stacked on top of each other like toy soldiers in a box. See Keel, *Symbolism of the Biblical World,* 254-55.

David's lord because God has made him "Lord," i.e., a messianic ruler. Furthermore, Jesus's quotation of Psalm110:1 before the Sanhedrin (Luke 22:69) brings two additional elements to Peter's interpretation. First, the psalm rightly applies to Jesus as the Messiah. Second, Jesus reaches the position at God's right hand shortly after his death.

If Psalm 110 originally referred to Israel's Davidic king, how does Peter interpret it as referring to Christ?[16] On the one hand, Peter's interprets the psalm typologically. In Acts 2:30, Peter employs the language of Psalm 132 to invoke the Davidic Covenant: "God had sworn an oath to seat one of his [David's] descendants on the throne." Peter understands the Davidic Covenant as being fulfilled not by a line of rulers but by one Messiah. When God seats Jesus on the throne at his right hand, he makes him his eternal vice-regent and fulfills his promise to David. Jesus fills David's royal office and Israel's messianic hope for a greater Son of David. On the other hand, however, Peter frames his use of the psalms in terms of direct prophetic fulfillment. David "looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ" (Acts 2:31).

Peter concludes his argument by calling on his listeners to "know with certainty that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (v. 36). Although in verse 23 Peter attributes blame for Jesus's death to the Romans, here he blames his

16. Gregory V. Trull describes seven different "views" on the use of Psalm 16 in the Pentecost Sermon: (1) constitutes a hermeneutical error; (2) is a use of Jewish hermeneutical techniques; (3) is an example of *sensus plenior*; (4) should be understood in light of the entire biblical canon so that the NT explains the meaning of the OT; (5) is an example of the NT's use of OT typology; (6) is best explained in that OT text and the NT text have a single message but different referents; and (7) constitutes the fulfillment of a direct OT prophecy which refers only to Christ ("Views on Peter's Use of Psalm 16:8-11 in Acts 2:25-32," *BSac* 161 [2004]: 198-214). The same descriptions can be applied to the various ways that scholars have approached and understood the use of Psalm 110 in the Pentecost Sermon. Although Trull pits these "views" against each other as opposing interpretations of the text, the different approaches that he describes are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

audience, the Jews. They are to blame for Jesus's death, but Jesus's resurrection and ascension prove that he is Lord and Christ.

Having made the argument that Jesus is Lord, Peter now turns to sermon application. The listeners are "pierced to the heart," that is, they feel conviction for their sin of rejecting Jesus (v. 37). They ask Peter and the other apostles what they should do. Peter replies that they should "Repent and be baptized, each of the you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Thus Peter calls on the listeners to respond to the message both inwardly, through repentance, and outwardly, through baptism. They are to take action. The action, baptism, is a sign of the inner change of heart. Peter supports his call to action by stating that "the promise is for you and for your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (v. 38). The "promise" refers back to Peter's quotation of Joel 2, which states "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (v. 21). As Peter explained earlier in the sermon, the salvation Joel prophesies includes the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter thus uses a constellation of several Old Testament Scriptures that work together to lead to the sermon application: Peter's listeners should turn to the Lord Jesus in faith and repentance, and they will be saved. That salvation includes both forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Luke writes next, "With many other words he testified and strongly urged them, saying 'Be saved from this corrupt generation'" (v. 40). The words recorded in Acts 2 are only a summary of Peter's full sermon. At the point of the sermon application, Peter appeals to his listeners with passion and at length. He cares about the salvation of their souls. Luke concludes that many of the listeners responded to the call to apply the message. About

three thousand people "who accepted his message were baptized" and "added" to the community of believers in Jesus (v. 41).

Christian preachers today can note at least two principles about sermon application from Peter's sermon. The first principle has to do with the interpretation of Scripture. Peter interprets Psalm 110 in a way that is consistent with the psalm's original meaning as intended by its author. Even so, Peter interprets the psalm in light of Jesus's teaching and the gospel events of Jesus's life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Peter also interprets the psalm in the light of other Scripture texts. Christian preachers, therefore, should also interpret Scripture passages in the light of the whole of God's revelation in the canon of Scripture, especially the gospel events. The second principle is the necessity of a sermon application based on such an interpretation of the Scripture passage. The interpretation of a Scripture passage in light of Christ and its application are distinct but connected elements of the sermon and of sermon preparation.[17]

2 Timothy 3:15—4:2: Instruction for Preaching

The Bible's fullest instruction about preaching is found in 2 Timothy, as Paul encourages his younger protégé in his ministry. In 2 Timothy 3:15—4:2, Paul writes:

> [A]nd you know that from infancy you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. I solemnly charge you before God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and because of his appearing and his kingdom: Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; correct, rebuke, and encourage with great patience and teaching.

17. See, for example, Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 287-89.

The renowned command, "Preach the word" (4:2), is preceded by a description of the nature of Scripture. "All Scripture" (3:16) certainly includes "the sacred writings" (3:15), the Old Testament. Paul may also be referring to "what you have learned" (3:14), that is, what Paul taught Timothy about Christ. Peter regarded Paul's writings as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16), and thus the teaching about "Scripture" here applies to the New Testament as well. Paul notes three characteristics of Scripture. First, God uses it to bring people to salvation, when those who understand its message respond by trusting in Jesus. The Scriptures "are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (3:15). Second, the Scripture is "inspired by God" (3:16). The ESV translates the term θεόπνευστος literally as "breathed out by God."

Third, the Scripture is useful to the Christian minister. This characteristic of Scripture proves relevant to sermon application. Paul writes that the Scripture is "profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (3:16-17). Thus, Paul lists four activities in which the Scripture is useful to the pastor: teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training. The first term, διδασκαλία, refers to the "act of teaching" and can be translated "instruction."[18] Second, the term ἔλεγμός denotes "an expression of strong disapproval."[19] Third, while here it is translated "correcting," the term ἐπανόρθωσις typically describes an "improvement," such as the restoration of a city.[20] Fourth, the term

18. BDAG, "διδασκαλία," 240.

19. BDAG, "ἔλεγμός," 314.

20. BDAG, "ἐπανόρθωσις," 359.

παιδεία ("training") describes "the act of providing guidance for responsible living."[21] Stott summarizes this fourfold description of Scripture as describing both the positive and the negative aspects of instruction regarding doctrine and conduct. With regard to doctrine, the pastor uses Scripture both positively to teach and negatively to refute. With regard to conduct, the pastor uses the Scripture both negatively to correct and positively to train. [22] Armed with the Scripture, the pastor is "complete," that is, "well fitted" and "able to meet all demands" of his role.[23]

Having described the Scripture, Paul now motivates Timothy to preach it. Timothy must preach because Christ Jesus will "judge the living and the dead" (4:1). At Christ's "appearing" or Second Coming, at which point he will establish his kingdom, he will hold Timothy and his other ministers accountable for representing his message faithfully. Timothy should be motivated to preach as he considers his own and his listeners' accountability before Christ.

Paul goes on to instruct Timothy in how he should preach (4:2). The content of Timothy's preaching should be "the word." The "word" refers to "the good deposit" (1:14), the "pattern of sound teaching" (1:13) about Christ that comes from both the Old Testament (3:15) and the apostles' testimony (1:11). For Christian preachers today, preaching the word is synonymous with preaching the Scriptures. Timothy should be ready to preach "in season and out of season." Some interpreters take this to mean that Timothy

21. BDAG, "παιδεία," 748.

22. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy,* The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1973), 103.

23. BDAG, "ἄρτιος," 136.

should preach whether or not the listeners want to hear it,[24] and others take it to mean whether or not it is convenient for Timothy.[25] Given the context of listeners turning away from the truth (4:3-4), it seems they are in view, although Paul might also have the preacher in mind. As Stott points out, this is not an excuse for "insensitive brashness."

Next Paul uses three verbs to describe various ways Timothy should preach: "correct, rebuke, and encourage" (4:2). As Towner writes, the first verb refers to "the patient kind of correction carried out through teaching," while the second refers to "the sterner variety of authoritative warnings or prohibitions," and the third to "a very practical kind of exhortation from biblical texts which urges practical, lifestyle responses."[26] Stott writes that this threefold description of preaching is "almost a classification of three approaches, intellectual, moral and emotional."[27] Timothy should preach with great "patience," an ability to "bear up under provocation"[28] while preaching continually and repeatedly. Though the message is urgent, preachers cannot force hearers to respond immediately. Finally, Timothy's ministry is one of "teaching."

Paul's instruction about preaching (4:1-2) flows directly from the description of the nature of Scripture (3:16). The Scripture is "useful for teaching," so the preacher's ministry is one of "teaching." The Scripture is useful for "rebuking" and "correcting," so the preacher should "rebuke" and "correct." The Scripture is useful for "training in righteousness," so the

24. E.g., BDAG, "ἀκαίρως," 34.

25. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy,* 107.

26. Philip H. Towner, *1-2 Timothy & Titus,* IVP New Testament Commentary 14 (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 1994), 204.

27. Stott, *The Message of 2 Timothy,* 108.

28. BDAG, μακροθυμία, 612.

preacher should "encourage with great patience." No wonder the content of the Christian preacher's message is "the word!" All preaching is thus aimed toward application, that is, change in the listeners' beliefs and lives.

In conclusion, Christian preachers are instructed to use the Scripture to make application in the lives of their hearers. Application should be directed both toward the sphere of the hearers' beliefs about doctrine and toward the sphere of the hearers' conduct. Within each sphere, the Scripture is used in both positively (to encourage or train or teach) and negatively (to correct or rebuke). Furthermore, the preacher, in various situations, might make intellectual arguments, moral warnings, or emotional appeals. As a function of training or temperament, certain preachers prefer to speak about either doctrine or conduct. Similarly, certain preachers, due to personality or experience, tend to adopt either a positive or negative tone. However, this passage exhorts preachers to strive for a full range of content and tone in sermon application, tailoring each sermon to fit the biblical text and the listeners' needs.

Varied Applications of the Golden Rule in the Pauline Epistles

Finally, Paul's applications of the Golden Rule in Galatians 5 and Romans 13 illustrate a key principle for sermon application, that one biblical principle legitimately may be applied differently in distinct contexts. The commandment known as the Golden Rule is stated in Leviticus 19:18 as "Love your neighbor as yourself." Paul's application of the Golden Rule in both Galatians and Romans is dependent on Jesus's teaching about it. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that this principle summarizes Old Testament revelation: "for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12). Jesus also calls the

Golden Rule the second greatest commandment, following only the command to love the Lord whole-heartedly, and he declares that "all the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:39-40).

Interestingly, Paul applies the Golden Rule differently in Galatians than he does in Romans. In Galatians 5, Paul counters the false teaching that Christians must obey the Mosaic Law, especially the requirement of circumcision. Rather than seeking to obey all of the stipulations of the Mosaic Law, Christians need simply to believe in Christ and to love one another: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; what matters is faith working through love" (v. 6). At the same time, Paul does not want the Galatians' freedom from the Law to serve as an excuse to mistreat one another. "Don't use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. For the whole law is fulfilled in one statement: Love your neighbor as yourself. But if you bite and devour one another, watch out, or you will be consumed by one another" (vv. 13-15). Paul calls on the Galatians to "walk by the Spirit"—avoiding sins such as impurity and angry outbursts, instead exhibiting kindness and gentleness.

Romans 13, by way of contrast, concerns how Christians relate to those outside the church. Paul may be instructing his readers in how to respond to the charge, leveled at them by outsiders, that Christians, in their loyalty to Christ as their king and Lord, will cause civil and social upheaval.[29] Paul calls on his readers to submit to the government, to pay taxes, and to pay respect and honor to those in authority (vv. 1-7). He then writes, "Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (v. 8). Thus, Christians should meet their societal obligations, including

29. On the relationship of the fledgling Christian community to the state, see F. F. Bruce, *Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary 6, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 218-22.

paying debts, and they should seek the good of those around them. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” Paul writes. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law” (vv. 9-10).

These texts illustrate how one biblical principle may lead to variety of applications. Both applications are consistent with Jesus’s teaching that the Golden Rule is the overarching principle governing ethical relationships for believers. They diverge as they take into account the distinct contexts and distinct spiritual needs of the two audiences. In Galatians, to an audience roiled by interchurch conflict, Paul applies the Golden Rule to relationships within the church community. Christians are not obligated to follow the Mosaic Law, but still they should love their neighbors, which in this context means relating to fellow believers with kindness and purity. In Romans, written to a church facing criticism, Paul applies the Golden Rule to his readers’ relationships with those outside the church. Believers in Christ should love their neighbors by fulfilling their obligations, especially financial obligations, in civic and business life.

Application in Expository Preaching

Having overviewed preaching and sermon application in the Bible, we now turn to Christian preaching today. Resting on the conviction that Scripture is God’s Word, evangelical models of preaching are typically described as expository. That is to say, the sermon concept is extracted from the text. Such a model seeks to ensure that the sermon application conforms to God’s revelation. The following section presents a model of expository preaching and examines the role of application within it.

A classic definition. Haddon Robinson penned the following definition of expository preaching: "Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers."[30] Widely taught in evangelical seminaries, Robinson's work provides a classic model in which we might observe the role of sermon application. This model may be divided into three constituent parts: the text, the preacher, and the hearers.

The first element of expository preaching is the Scripture text. The preacher assumes that God has communicated truth in the passage of Scripture on which the sermon is based. The truths God has communicated through Scripture are ideas or "concepts." An expository sermon must communicate some such concept.

The expository model carries implications for sermon preparation. Before crafting a sermon, the preacher interprets the Bible text on which the sermon will be based, engaging in the best practices of historical-grammatical exegesis. The text should be interpreted in the context of that particular book of the Bible and the larger context of the whole canon. Robinson taught that the sermon, including its applications, should be based on the "Big Idea," or main theme, of a biblical passage.[31] As such, the sermon communicates the most important concept from the biblical revelation rather than a peripheral concept. If the passage has more than one major purpose or theme, an expository sermon could be based on any one of them. The sermon, though, should major in what the text majors in, and

30. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

31. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 33-46.

minor in what the text minors in. The Big Idea model thus establishes guardrails so that the preacher focuses on the principal concepts God desires for people to know and believe.

The second element of expository preaching is the preacher, used by the Holy Spirit to communicate further a biblical concept in a specific time and place. Biblical passages are not simply read aloud, but the concepts are explained, defended, illustrated, argued, and applied. God uses a person to express the concept through a unique personality and experience. Indeed, the preacher puts flesh on the idea, expressing it using a unique voice and body. The sermon, of course, is not authoritative in the same way that Scripture is. Rather, the preacher's authority is derived authority. The sermon is true, and carries God's authority over the hearers, to the degree that it conveys the true concepts found in Scripture.

Robinson writes that the Holy Spirit applies the biblical concept to the personality and experience of the preacher. The preacher, then, has sought not only to understand the concept but also to believe and obey what God has said. Preaching is not merely talking but also modeling a life of faith. Of course, God can use even unbelievers to proclaim his messages, such as the Aramean soothsayer, Balaam, and the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar. It brings comfort to the preacher lacking confidence that even Balaam's donkey spoke some truth. Likewise, the message that is preached may be true even when the preacher's motivations are not pure. Paul writes that God has used preachers motivated by envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition to proclaim the good news about Jesus (Philippians 1:16-19). Every preacher, other than the Lord Jesus, is a sinner. Our words and lives intermingle truth and error. Even so, inasmuch as the preacher believes and obeys God's

Word, it will be communicated with integrity. Listeners receive a message more readily from a preacher they perceive as authentic.

This need for integrity has implications for the sermon preparation process. The preacher himself should seek to believe and obey the biblical concept, as Robinson notes, and then bring that experience to bear in the sermon. Furthermore, in general, the preacher who is filled by the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18)—yielding to the Spirit's control by actively seeking to believe and obey the Scripture—will follow more closely what the Spirit would have him say in a sermon than a preacher who is resisting the Spirit's control.

The third element of expository preaching is the hearers, to whom, Robinson writes, the preacher seeks to "apply" the biblical concept. The sermon is directed toward a specific group of people, with the desire that they will understand and believe and change their lives in submission to the biblical concept. John Stott famously described the preacher as standing "between two worlds," that is, between the world of the Bible and the world of the listener. The sermon forms a bridge over which the biblical concept travels into the lives of the listeners so that they can understand it and know how to respond appropriately.

Thus, in preparing the sermon, the preacher should seek not only to understand the biblical text but also to understand the listeners. Different groups of listeners have their own cultures, communication styles, needs, desires, problems, and sins. Knowing the audience well allows the preacher to shape both the content and the form of the sermon. The preacher seeks to speak to them in terms they understand and in a style that they appreciate. The preacher further seeks to apply the biblical concept to their specific needs, including their spiritual needs.

Application, therefore, is an integral element of preaching and of each sermon. A sermon does more than simply repeat or explain the biblical text. It calls on the listeners to respond in faith and in action in their own context.

The purpose of preaching. The purpose of preaching flows from the Great Commission. In Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus commands his disciples to go and make disciples. Making disciples will involve "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," and "teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you." Thus there are two stages of discipleship. The first is conversion, the initial coming to faith in Christ, expressed in terms of baptism, the symbolic rite by which new believers proclaim faith in Christ and are received into the church. The second stage is the believer's ongoing growth in trust and obedience. Jesus refers to this stage in terms of teaching believers to obey all his commands. Two key New Testament texts demonstrate how God uses preaching, and sermon application in particular, in these two stages.

In Romans 10, Paul writes of how God uses preaching to bring unbelievers to faith in Christ. "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on him they have not believed in? And how can they believe without hearing about him? And how can they hear without a preacher?" (vv. 13-14). Paul thus traces in reverse chronological order the process by which God saves people. God saves those who call on him. Those who call on him first believe. Those who believe must first hear the message. In order for them to hear the message, someone must preach it to them. Paul later concludes, "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the message about Christ" (v. 17). Therefore, God uses preaching to communicate the good news about Jesus

to people who had not previously heard it or had not previously accepted it. God then saves those who believe the message.

In addition, according to 2 Timothy 3:15—4:2, as we have seen, the preacher is to apply the Scripture to the listeners' doctrine, both by "teaching" and "rebuking." Furthermore, the preacher applies Scripture to the listeners' lives, by "correcting" and "training in righteousness." Therefore, the second purpose of sermon application is helping listeners grow as Jesus' disciples.

The work of God in preaching. To preach is to do God's work. God has chosen preaching as a means through which he works, first of all, to give people spiritual life and, secondly, to help them grow in their Christian faith and practice. God uses preaching to help people hear, understand, and respond to his Word.

The roles of the different persons of the Trinity in preaching are in some ways parallel to their roles in the work of salvation. In the work of salvation, the Father initiated the plan of salvation. He sent the Son into the world. The Son lived a perfect life and died an atoning death in the place of sinners. The Father raised the Son from the dead and seated him at his right hand as Lord over all things. The Father and the Son send the Holy Spirit to live in those who trust in the Son. The Spirit also does the work of convicting people of their sin, giving spiritual life to those who trust in the Son, and empowering believers to serve God and others. The Son will one day come again to the judge the world, claim his kingdom, and hand it over to the Father. The Father receives the glory.

Of course, this summary of the roles of the persons of the Trinity is perhaps too simplistic. The roles of each person are expansive and overlapping. God is one. The persons of the Trinity are so unified that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish their roles. For

example, the Father and Son convict people of sin, though we often attribute that role to the Spirit. Still, the Scripture does reveal distinctions and unique roles for each person in salvation. For example, only the Son died for sinners, not the Father or the Spirit. Likewise, at the risk of oversimplification, the roles of the three persons of the Trinity in preaching can be summarized as follows.

In preaching, the Father is the source of the message. He is the one who sent the Son to save sinners, and he authored the Bible, which reveals the Son. Thus when Christian preachers preach the Scriptures, they declare a message which comes from the Father. The Father also receives glory as people respond to his Word.

In the apostle's preaching, their subject was the Son. The New Testament describes the apostles as preaching "Christ" or "the gospel," the good news about Christ. The Son accomplished the work of saving sinners who would believe in him. Thus, preaching is delivering the message about what he has done. Furthermore, Jesus taught that even the Old Testament Scriptures point to him (Luke 24:27). Not every Bible passage has Jesus as its explicit subject, and there is some debate among proponents of expository preaching as to whether every expository sermon must mention Jesus. However, every Bible passage should be understood within the context of the entire canon, which has salvation through Jesus as its ultimate theme. Whether or not Jesus is mentioned in every sermon, an expository preacher's sermons together will point toward salvation through Christ.

The Holy Spirit works through preaching in several ways. First, the Holy Spirit was at work in the authorship of the Scripture. Second, the Holy Spirit works in the life of the preacher. The Spirit helps the preacher to understand the Scripture, to prepare the sermon, and to deliver it. Furthermore, the Spirit works in the life of the preacher to develop

spiritual maturity and to bear spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22). Thus the preacher is able to proclaim God's Word with integrity and authenticity, exhibiting both authority and humility. Finally, the Holy Spirit works in the listeners. The Spirit gives listeners understanding. He accomplishes the work of regeneration, giving spiritual life to those listeners who believe (Titus 3:5-6). The Holy Spirit also empowers believers to respond to the sermon with faith and obedience.

The work of all three persons of the Trinity in preaching is evident in 1 Corinthians 2:1-4, where Paul describes his earlier ministry to the Corinthian church:

> When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God's power.

The Father is the source of the message. Paul proclaims the Father's "mystery," his wonderful plan of salvation only recently revealed. The Son is the content of the message. Paul preaches only "Jesus Christ and him crucified." The Holy Spirit empowers the preacher so that he proclaims the message both with humility ("weakness") and authority (demonstrating "the Spirit's power"), and the Spirit empowers the listeners to believe. Thus the Triune God works through preaching to work his will.

Conclusion

As we have seen, an evangelical model of sermon application rests on the conviction, consistent with the Bible's testimony about itself, that the Bible is the inerrant and authoritative Word of God. As such, sermon applications must be derived legitimately from

the Scripture text. Examples of preaching in the Bible provide preachers today a model for proper sermon application. Sermons in the Bible always include application, typically a call to faith in God and often a call to demonstrate that faith in action. The apostles' sermons call listeners to faith in Christ, and their teaching calls on Christians to live in light of the gospel. Furthermore, key biblical passages provide principles for sermon application. Scripture should be interpreted consistent with the original author's intent and also in light of Christ's coming, death, resurrection, and ascension, yet its truths should be applied to the listeners' context. Scripture should be applied to the hearers' beliefs and to their conduct, both positively (to encourage or train or teach) and negatively (to correct or rebuke). Application can be directed towards the head (understanding), the heart (emotions and attitudes), and the hands (taking action). The same scriptural principles can be applied differently in distinct contemporary contexts. Thus, in an evangelical model of preaching, application is an essential component. God uses his Word in preaching to give life and change lives as hearers believe and obey the message.

How then can preachers legitimately derive applications from the Scripture for contemporary listeners? The next chapter will review scholarly literature about sermon application, focusing on ways to bridge the Scripture text and the contemporary cultural context. The chapter will also examine literature related to the culture of "small places" with an aim toward helping preachers who serve there.

CHAPTER THREE

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

How can preachers in small towns and rural areas go about developing sermon applications specifically for their congregations? This chapter will survey the literature about sermon application. The works surveyed will include three of the preaching textbooks most widely taught in evangelical seminaries.[1] Among these, John Stott's *Between Two Worlds* presents an influential conceptualization for sermon application. The most widely taught and emulated evangelical preaching textbook today is Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching,* which will receive proportionate attention here. Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching* is now regarded as another standard primer, especially in Reformed seminaries. Other general homiletics works which have made significant contributions with regard to application will be mentioned: those by Sunukjian; Keller; Carter, Duvall, and Hays; and Kuruvilla. In addition, attention will be given to several specialized works on sermon application: those by Adams, Overdorf, Capill, Koessler, and Arthurs.[2]

These writers call for preachers to tailor sermon applications according to the needs and cultures of their listeners. However, general textbooks do not address specific cultural contexts in any depth, such as the cultures of small towns and rural areas. Even the works

1. Scott M. Gibson, "Evangelical Homiletics Society Legacy Preaching Textbook Survey," *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 19, no. 2 (September 2019), 16-19.

2. Beyond the works surveyed here, see the articles about sermon application collected in Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson, eds., *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today's Communicators* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005); and Craig Brian Larson, ed., *Interpretation and Application* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012).

devoted specifically to sermon application have not given attention to analysis of particular cultural contexts. As such, Matthew Kim's *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence,* which provides tools for analyzing the culture of listeners, will be discussed. The chapter will conclude by referring to two books about ministry in small towns and rural areas. Their analysis of this cultural context serves as a useful starting place for preachers serving in such areas and seeking to tailor applications for their listeners.

The Necessity of Application

Is application necessary to preaching? Some might argue that application is outside of the preacher's domain and should be left to the Holy Spirit or the listeners to work out. However, there is a broad consensus among evangelicals that application is essential to the sermon. Before describing that consensus, it will be instructive by way of contrast to describe an influential approach to sermon application outside of evangelicalism.

Following the cultural shifts of the 1960s, observers diagnosed a crisis in preaching: listeners found traditional, lecture-style sermons dull and irrelevant. Preachers in the New Homiletic movement, which flourished in the 1970s and 80s, especially in mainline denominations, reacted by experimenting with innovative sermon forms.[3] Abandoning a strict doctrine of inerrancy, many of these preachers relied on Bultmann's New Hermeneutic for interpreting Scripture.[4] Uneasiness with the authority of Scripture led to reticence in sermon application. In general, applications in the sermons of the New

3. Richard L. Eslinger, *A New Hearing: Living Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 11-14.

4. According to the New Hermeneutic, grace in the Scripture is "shrouded in myth, which is unacceptable to the modern mind and accordingly must be demythologized and reinterpreted in existentialist terms." R. G. Gruenler, "New Hermeneutic," in Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology,* 2d. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 829.

Homiletic are implied rather than stated, suggested not instructed, and tentative as opposed to certain.

Charles Rice exemplifies the New Homiletic's use of narrative forms. He intends the sermon to create an interaction between the biblical story and his listeners' life stories. "A Sermon for Pentecost Day" typifies his approach. Rice describes at length a recent movie about the plight of a poor immigrant couple. He juxtaposes that narrative with a description of wealthy Americans eating expensive dinners in his own neighborhood. Rice then quotes from Joel 2, a prophecy about God's Spirit coming on all kinds of people. Rice concludes that marginalized people will have hope when the Holy Spirit liberates the church from "everything that holds it down." The implied application is that the listeners should feel guilty about their materialism. However, Rice does not specify what actions the listeners should take.[5]

A foremost teacher of the New Homiletic, Fred Craddock, crafts inductive forms in his sermons. He views the sermon as a conversation between the listeners and the biblical text or a journey that the listeners take as they encounter the text.[6] In its structure, the inductive sermon begins with the details of life and leads up to a general truth, rather than beginning with a general truth and proceeding deductively to particular applications.[7] Application (Craddock rarely uses the term) occurs during the event experienced in the sermon. "Sermons should proceed or move in such a way as to give the listener something

5. Charles Rice, "A Sermon for Pentecost Day," in Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 32-37.

6. Lucy Atkinson Rose makes the concept of the sermon as conversation quite literal in her model of preaching. Members of the congregation are given an opportunity to speak in the "sermon" portion of the worship service. See her *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

7. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 52-48.

to think, feel, decide, or do during the preaching."[8] The goal is for the hearer to "arrive at a conclusion that is the hearer's own, not just the speaker's." Furthermore, "the listener completes the sermon" in the sense that the preacher, rather than specifying conclusions and actions to be taken, allows the listener to participate "in the completion of the thought, movement, and decision making within the sermon itself."[9] Craddock's preaching model flows from his theological convictions. On the one hand, the Scripture, while it contains the voice of God, is not wholly reliable. On the other hand, listeners "are not so much evil as they are bored."[10] Therefore, the preacher, rather than directly telling listeners what to believe or do, facilitates an encounter with God's Word through an aesthetically interesting sermon. Unlike Jesus, Craddock's preacher, as designated in his book's title, speaks *As One Without Authority.*

Eugene Lowry, another preacher associated with the New Homiletic, recommends that sermons, even when they are not narratives, have the structure of a story. The listeners' felt need or spiritual need is a problem to be solved, which the sermon shows to be more complicated than originally thought. The turning point of the sermon comes when God's grace is proclaimed, resolving tension yet leading to further implications.[11]

Evangelical preachers have benefitted from the New Homiletic's exploration of sermon forms such as narrative sermons, inductive sermons, and Lowry's "homiletical plot." These forms can be used without abandoning the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy and

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8. Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 25 (cited in Eslinger, *A New Hearing*, 113).

9. Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* 52-54.

10. Craddock, *As One Without Authority,* 71.

11. Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

without eschewing application. Evangelicals also benefit from the New Homiletic's emphases on relevance and on understanding the language, perspectives, and needs of the listeners. Unlike some preachers of the New Homiletic, however, most evangelicals agree that preachers must proclaim God's grace with authority, demonstrating that it demands a response of faith and obedience.

In contrast to the New Homiletic, most evangelical homileticians hold that direct and specific application is an essential element of the sermon. Haddon Robinson's definition of expository preaching culminates in application. He defines expository preaching as "the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers."[12] For Chapell, application is the focus of the entire sermon, such that all the other elements of the sermon, including exposition of the text, serve the application. Although a sermon is comprised of explanation, illustration, and application, the "unfolding of biblical truth makes the components of exposition interdependent and, at times, indistinguishable."[13] Murray Capill likewise argues that application should be included in sermons. He writes, "If the point of preaching is that people, through the Word of God proclaimed by the preacher, hear the very voice of Christ in a life-impacting way, then far more is called for than biblical faithfulness alone.

12. Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 21.

13. Bryan, Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon,* 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 74.

Application is required."[14] Carter, Duvall, and Hays warn aspiring preachers, "Until your people have been challenged to change something in their lives—a behavior, a belief, an attitude, an insecurity, a fear—you have not successfully completed your sermon."[15]

In *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching,* Jay Adams calls on preachers to aim the entire sermon toward application. He critiques those preachers who fail to provide applications. Such preachers include those influenced by Karl Barth's neo-orthodoxy, conservative preachers following Gerhardus Vos's biblical-theological model who focus on broad themes,[16] and conservative preachers who follow an expository model and focus on minute details of the text. Adams writes that such preachers take the posture of a spectator. They explain their observations of the biblical text and leave application to the listener. Other preachers assume a position among the listeners as a recipient of God's Word. These preachers fail to make applications out of reluctance to appear arrogant. According to Adams, preachers should instead take the posture of a herald who proclaims God's Word to the present congregation. In the study, the preacher identifies with the recipients of God's Word, but in the pulpit the preacher identifies with God. Rather than using third-person language ("The Amalekites…they…") or first-person language ("We are told in this passage"), the herald majors in second-person language ("God says you…").[17]

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14. Murray Capill, *The Heart is the Target: Preaching Practical Application from Every Text* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2014), 14.

15. Terry G. Carter, J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Preaching God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Preparing, Developing, and Delivering the Sermon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 118.

16. Adams observes that some practitioners of the preaching model emphasizing Vos's biblical theology neglect application. However, Bryan Chapell, the leading teacher of this approach, makes application integral to his model.

17. Jay E. Adams, *Truth Applied: Application in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 19-32.

Daniel Overdorf is sympathetic to the argument that overly specific sermon applications might limit the work of the Holy Spirit in applying the truth of God's Word to the listeners. However, he writes, "Effective preaching includes application that preserves biblical integrity while pursuing contemporary relevance."[18] He argues that the Holy Spirit can work both through the preacher to help the listeners to apply the text as well as in the listeners themselves. He writes, "Though effective sermons include application, the application does not drive such sermons. Instead, effective sermons are driven by the Word and the Spirit—God's truth and God's power."[19] According to Overdorf, "effective sermon applications offer possibilities that enhance the work of the Spirit."[20]

These writers represent a consensus among evangelicals that application is essential to preaching. Developing applications for a contemporary context, however, presents thorny hermeneutical and practical issues. Contemporary Christians cannot obey every biblical command in precisely the same way as the original recipients of God's Word, nor should we follow the example of every biblical character. While evangelicals do not agree in every detail, there is broad consensus in how preachers should conceive of the task of sermon application, as the following sections will show.

The Sermon as a Bridge

In *Between Two Worlds,* John Stott depicts preaching as bridge building. Stott writes, "A true sermon bridges the gulf between the biblical and modern worlds, and must be

18. Daniel Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon: How to Balance Biblical Integrity and Cultural Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 19.

19. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon,* 49.

20. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon,* 53.

equally earthed in both."[21] Stott points out that the chasm between these worlds is a *cultural* divide even wider than the gulf between distinct contemporary cultures. Some preachers make the mistake of preaching sermons that remain in the biblical world. Such sermons contain exposition without application, or the application is irrelevant to the listeners. On the other hand, some preachers, in a desire to be relevant, discuss the contemporary world without bringing biblical truth to bear on it. However, Stott argues, what contemporary people need is to hear from God. Therefore, the preacher's task is to "relate God's unchanging Word to our ever-changing world."[22] Stott writes, "Such preaching will be authoritative in expounding biblical principles, but tentative in applying them to the complex issues of the day." In applying the Scripture to contemporary personal, ethical, social, and political issues, preachers should encourage listeners to "develop a Christian mind and use it."[23]

With regard to application, Stott calls on preachers not merely to say something but to do something with their sermons. In general, the aim of the sermon should be, in the words of Charles Simeon, "to humble the sinner, to exalt the Savior, and to promote holiness." Yet, Stott writes, "The precise aim of our sermon depends, however, on two variables, namely the character of our text and the composition of our congregation."[24] The dominant theme of the text "needs to be enforced in such a way that the people feel its

21. John Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 10. See further Chapter 4, "Preaching as Bridge-building," 135-178.

22. Stott, *Between Two Worlds,* 144.

23. Stott, *Between Two Worlds,* 178.

24. Stott, *Between Two Worlds,* 251.

impact and go away determined to act on it."[25] In order to develop applications specific to the congregation, Stott writes, "It is good to let our mind wander over the church family and ask prayerfully what God might have for each from our text."[26] He recommends listing several applications directed at various individuals or groups within the congregation. Sensitive to how receptive the listeners are to the message, the preacher may need to "persuade by argument (anticipating and answering people's objections), or by admonition (warning them of the consequences of disobedience), or by indirect conviction (first arousing a moral judgment in them and then turning it upon themselves, as Nathan did with David), or by pleading (applying the gentle pressure of God's love)."[27]

Thus, Stott sees sermon application as a bridge-building enterprise that spans a *cultural* divide. This focus on culture and the understanding that sermon application is cross-cultural work are helpful concepts for preachers seeking to apply the Scripture for listeners in particular cultural contexts. Stott models such preaching for contemporary culture in general; he does not address the task of building bridges into particular local cultures, such as the cultures of small towns. Furthermore, the notion of building a bridge into the contemporary world is complicated by the reality that many preachers serve congregations with various subcultures.

Even so, evangelical writers developing models for sermon application generally have adopted this conceptualization of preaching as a bridge. The biblical teaching should not always be applied to the contemporary listeners in precisely the same way as it was to

25. Stott, *Between Two Worlds,* 251-52.

26. Stott, *Between Two Worlds,* 252.

27. Stott, *Between Two Worlds,* 253-54.

the original recipients of God's Word, but must cross over a chasm separating cultural and theological contexts. To traverse this bridge, and before descending into the listeners' contemporary context, teachers of homiletics suggest that preachers consider the following concepts: the "Big Idea" of the biblical passage, the purpose of the biblical revelation, the biblical principles, the theological context of the passage and the listeners, and audience analysis. These concepts will be explored below.

The Big Idea and Sermon Application

Haddon Robinson's hallmark contribution to homiletics is the "Big Idea." In his model, the singular main idea of the sermon flows from the singular main idea of the biblical text. The Holy Spirit first applies the biblical concept (the Big Idea) to the preacher. Robinson writes, "Ultimately God is more interested in developing messengers than messages, and because the Holy Spirit confronts us primarily through the Bible, we must learn to listen to God before speaking for God."[28] Then the Holy Spirit "applies that truth through the preacher to the hearers." Robinson admonishes preachers to include relevant applications. Preachers should not address "the ages" or everyone in general, but their particular listeners who "exist at a particular address and have mind-sets unique to them."[29] In seeking to be relevant, preachers should not simply reinforce what listeners already think, but rather "relate the current situation to the eternal Word of God."[30]

28. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 27.

29. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 28.

30. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 30.

Robinson designed a process for developing expository sermons with the intention that the Big Idea of a biblical passage would lead to the Big Idea of the sermon. As the following summary shows, application is integral to his model. Application plays a role as the preacher selects a preaching text, in that the preacher considers the needs of the congregation. Next the preacher studies the passage and uncovers the "exegetical idea," to be stated in a single sentence that combines both subject and complement. At this stage, the preacher brackets off consideration of application in order to focus on the original meaning of the Bible text.

In the remaining stages, the preacher endeavors "to bring the ancient world, the modern world, and our particular world together."[31] The preacher analyzes the exegetical idea by subjecting it to three developmental questions. The first is "What does it mean?" The question may be directed at the biblical text in order to understand an author's argument, or it may be directed at the listeners to the sermon, as the preacher seeks to anticipate what needs to be explained in order to help the listeners understand the biblical concept. The second question is "Is it true?" The preacher seeks to anticipate whether the listeners believe the concept and to answer potential objections. The third section concerns application: "What difference does it make?" Robinson's recommendations for how preachers approach application will be discussed below.

The preacher next formulates a "homiletical idea," a restatement of the exegetical idea in memorable and contemporary terms that forms the central idea of the sermon. Then the preacher determines the purpose of the sermon and states it as an instructional objective (that the listener will learn or change in a specific way or take a specific action).

31. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 75.

"The purpose behind each individual sermon is to secure some moral action," Robinson writes.[32] Thus, in his model, the purpose of the sermon is an application.

The remaining stages have to do with composing the sermon: deciding how to accomplish the sermon's purpose (that is, choosing a logical arrangement of ideas), outlining the sermon, filling in the outline (which includes adding illustrations that the listeners will appreciate), and preparing the introduction and conclusion. The introduction hints at the application to come by raising a felt need of the listeners. While the whole sermon should be geared towards application, Robinson allows for a great deal of variety in sermon form and the placement of application sections within the sermon outline.

Robinson's Big Idea model has broadly influenced evangelical preachers. Preaching models universally begin with exegesis of the biblical passage, leading to the determination of its central concept, and then applications are derived from this central theme.

Purpose and Application

Writers about sermon application encourage preachers to consider the original purpose of the biblical passage. The biblical author recorded events or divine instruction or some other type of revelation in order to influence the original readers or hearers in some way. Preachers today should develop sermon applications which have a purpose consistent with the purpose of the biblical passage.

The Scripture's purpose is central to Robinson's approach to application. After warning that application must follow accurate exegesis, Robinson writes, "In order to apply a passage accurately, we must define the situation into which the revelation was originally

32. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 107. In my view, however, the purpose of each sermon is faith in God.

given and then decide what a modern man or woman shares, or does not share, with the original readers. The closer the relationship between people now and people then, the more direct the application."[33] Invalid methods of application include allegory, using Old Testament texts simply to illustrate New Testament doctrine, and proof-texting. Rather, preachers should discern the biblical author's theological purpose in including the passage and distill eternal truths or guiding principles from this theological purpose. A way to do this is to look for the vision of God in the biblical passage and the "human factor" in the way that the biblical characters responded to God. Preachers should consider similar factors in the lives of their listeners and present this vision of God to them. Robinson writes, "To be effective, sermons must relate biblical truth to life. The most effective sermons are those that do this in a specific, not a general, way."[34] Since not all applications carry the same level of authority, preachers should make clear to listeners whether a proposed application is necessary, probable, or possible.

Similarly, Adams instructs preachers to do "telic analysis" of the Scripture text. That is, the preacher should discover the purpose of the text, "what the Holy Spirit intends to do to the listener from it."[35] The preacher should use the sermon for the same purpose. For example, in Philippians 2, Paul describes Christ as a servant in order to encourage his readers, who were in conflict, to put each other's needs ahead of their own. A sermon on Philippians 2, then, should not simply describe an aspect of Christology but apply it to the congregation, extoling the listeners to serve one another.

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33. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 87.

34. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching,* 96.

35. Adams, *Truth Applied,* 38.

Purpose also plays an important role in Abraham Kuruvilla's works on homiletics.[36] He focuses on the pragmatics of the biblical text, the level of meaning having to do with what the author *does* with his words beyond the semantic meaning of the language. The preacher should discern the biblical author's pragmatic meaning for the sermon text and communicate it in the sermon. Kuruvilla labels this pragmatic meaning of a single pericope of Scripture its "pericopal theology." Each pericope presents an aspect of God's ideal world and invites the listeners to abide in it as they submit to God's demands. Kuruvilla insists that sermon applications must follow from the text's pericopal theology.[37]

Principles and Application

To help preachers cross the bridge from the biblical world into the contemporary world, several writers about sermon application propose the discernment of timeless principles in the biblical text. Adams views both the Scripture and the sermon as "truth applied." In the Scripture, certain principles have been applied to the original audience. The preacher's task is to discern the principle being applied and then apply the same principle similarly to the present congregation.[38] Adams suggests that the sermon's structure, whether deductive or inductive, be aimed toward application. The headings of the major points should be phrased with the listeners in mind, typically using second-person

36. Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!: A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013); *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); and *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). This paper relies on the summary of Kuruvilla's approach to sermon application in Josiah Boyd, *From Ancient Text to Valid Application: A Practical Exploration of Pericopal Theology in Preaching* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2021), 33-42.

37. Abraham Kuruvilla, "Pericopal Theology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (2016), 3-17.

38. Adams, *Truth Applied,* 47-48.

language. For example, a point in a sermon based on 1 Corinthians 13 about love should not be phrased "Its Ministry of Healing," but rather "Your Love Can Heal" or "God expects you to heal others by love."[39]

According to Donald R. Sunukjian, after exegeting the biblical passage, the preacher should pinpoint a timeless theological principle proceeding from the text. To do so, the preacher may employ the "ladder of abstraction." To reach the theological principle, one goes up the ladder. Sunukjian writes, "You want to find the language that is more general, more abstract—language that not only describes what is happening in the text, but that is also sufficiently broad to describe similar things that might occur in different centuries or cultures."[40] In crafting application, the preacher comes back down the ladder into specific contemporary situations that fall under the same general principle. Sunukjian writes that sermon applications should be "detailed and extended, not vague and brief" descriptions of "what the godliness would actually look like in various concrete moments."[41] Early in the sermon, the preacher should describe in extended detail a picture of the problem, and later there should be an equally vivid picture of the solution to that problem, so that listeners know how the timeless principle is relevant in their own lives.[42]

In contrast, Eugene Peterson warns against preaching principles to the neglect of the particularities of the story of God interacting with people. He compares distilling principles from Scripture to distilling moonshine whiskey from potatoes. He writes,

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39. Adams, *Truth Applied,* 88.

40. Donald R. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching: Proclaiming Truth with Clarity and Relevance* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 125-26. This concept follows Haddon W. Robinson, "The Heresy of Application," *Leadership* (Fall 1997): 20-27.

41. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 124.

42. Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching,* 106-127.

"Across this land pastors have turned their studies into 'stills,' illegal distilleries that extract ideas and morals from the teeming narrative of Scripture. People, of course, love it. They come to get their Mason-jar lives filled with pure truth so they won't have to deal with either the details of Scripture or the details of their own lives."[43] Peterson writes that the Bible is not a gnostic book of abstract truth, and so preachers should not excise mundane details of life from their sermons. Preachers who use the ladder of abstraction should heed Peterson's warning and show how the abstract principle is rooted in the details of Scripture and relates to the details of contemporary life.

Theological Context and Application

Before making applications, in addition to discerning the biblical passage's purpose and principles, evangelical homileticians stress the need to discern its theological context. The biblical passage should be interpreted in light of theology—both systematic theology and biblical theology. Evangelicals sometimes disagree about certain doctrines and they often disagree about which doctrines should be emphasized. However, they widely share theological convictions about the nature of God, sinful humanity, and salvation by grace through faith in Christ. The writers surveyed here agree that all of Scripture points to Christ. Of course, there are various understandings about how the Scriptures point to Christ. In spite of their differences, all these writers point to the need to discern a biblical passage's place within the unfolding plan of God's revelation. The passage should also be interpreted in light of all the doctrines coming from the whole of the biblical canon.

43. Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 135.

Theology is front and center in Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching,* which emphasizes the need to place proclamation of Christ at the center of preaching. His model draws on the "Biblical theology" of such theologians as Geerhardus Vos and Sidney Greidanus, who highlight the unifying themes of redemption across the biblical canon. A distinctive feature of Chapell's model is the "fallen condition focus." Chapell writes, "The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary persons share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him."[44] Citing the notion in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 that Scripture was given to make people complete, Chapell posits that the grace of God revealed in each Bible passage addresses a particular way in which the biblical characters or original readers are incomplete. The FCF might be a sin or it might be another type of need or burden: "an aspect or problem of the human condition that requires the instruction, admonition, or comfort of Scripture."[45] The solution to this FCF must not come from human performance but from God's provision. The preacher should identify this spiritual condition of the biblical characters or original audience and then determine a mutual spiritual concern of the listeners to the sermon. Chapell writes, "The truth of the text does not vary, but the significance of that truth can vary greatly and be stated in many different ways that are appropriate for differing situations."[46]

Having identified the FCF, the preacher develops sermon application to address that need. Chapell recommends stating the FCF early in the sermon before proclaiming Christ as

44. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 30.

45. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 32.

46. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 33.

a solution and providing specific guidance for the listeners' everyday lives. An emphasis of Chapell's approach is that the application is not an appeal to try harder but rather to rely on God's grace. "If we could fix the problem with our own efforts in our own strength, then we would not be truly fallen. Application that addresses an FCF clearly rooted in the textual situation necessarily directs people to the presence and power of the Savior as they seek to serve him."[47] The aim of application is transformation of attitudes as well as conduct.

Chapell writes that sermon applications should address what God requires of the listeners and specific situations where the listeners can obey. The preacher might focus on one arena of obedience while briefly suggesting others. In addition, the preacher should point to the motivation for obedience—not guilt or greed but grace. Finally, the preacher should show how to obey by detailing practical steps to follow and pointing to the means of grace (e.g., prayer, study, and fellowship). Thus, Chapell reminds the preacher that, for any and every Bible text, obedience (the specifics of what God requires) is rooted in faith in Christ.

Likewise, Timothy Keller calls on preachers to proclaim the gospel, not only in order to reach non-Christians but also as "the solution to every problem and the way to advance at every stage in the Christian life." He writes, "When the preacher solves Christians' problems with the gospel—not by calling them to try harder but by pointing them to deeper faith in Christ's salvation—then believers are being edified and nonbelievers are hearing the gospel, all at the same time."[48] To do so, Keller suggests the following structure

47. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 35.

48. Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), 119-20.

for the moves of a sermon or a point within a sermon: (1) The problem we face; (2) What we must do; (3) Why we can't do it; (4) How Jesus did it; (5) How through faith in Jesus you should live now.[49] Thus, the concluding application is shown to be motivated by the gospel.

Taking a different position, Kuruvilla argues that many preachers allow their theological framework to obscure the correct interpretation of biblical passages, such that the preachers preach their theology rather than the text's meaning. Rather than employing "christocentric" interpretation, which finds Christ explicitly present in every segment, Kuruvilla proposes a "christiconic hermeneutic," which looks for an implicit picture of Christ in every segment. The divine commands in Scripture point to Christ in that Christ was the only one who obeyed them perfectly. In one pericope, a divine command invites the listener to become like Christ in one aspect of his character. Rather than focusing on a unifying framework of theology for every sermon, Kuruvilla instructs preachers to focus on making applications based on the pragmatics of the text at hand. Over the course of a ministry, he writes, the cumulative effect of such preaching would be to lead the listeners toward a full, multifaceted image of Christlikeness.[50]

Exegeting the Listeners

A final concept with regard to sermon application is that of understanding the listeners in order to develop applications specifically relevant to them. Carter, Duvall, and Hays encourage preachers to "exegete the audience" in addition to exegeting the biblical text. Preachers should be aware of their listeners' level of spiritual maturity, biblical and

49. Keller, *Preaching,* 228-35.

50. Abraham Kuruvilla, "Christiconic Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (2016), 131-146.

theological knowledge, culture, and other factors such as age, gender, and the appropriate level of formality.[51]

Similarly, Adams writes that preachers should face two directions. They employ exegetical and research skills to study biblical revelation. From this work they uncover biblical principles. Preachers also employ data gathering and proclamation skills to apply these principles to their congregations. Adams encourages preachers to study contemporary culture, society, their community, and their congregation. To do so, the preacher must spend time with members of the congregation and rely on church elders who know the members well. Preachers who understand the needs and problems of the listeners can choose to preach on biblical texts containing principles relevant to them.[52]

Keller proposes a method for preachers to apply biblical truths to listeners in their particular culture. He encourages preachers to identify the listeners' baseline cultural narratives, the "premises that seem so self-evident as to be nearly invisible and unquestionable to those who hold them." For Western, late modern culture, such narratives include the notions that the natural world is the only reality, that history is constantly improving, and that human identity comes from the desires and dreams of the individual. The preacher should make the narrative visible to the listeners and affirm what is true or good about it. Then the preacher challenges the narrative, showing that it "is too simplistic, that it does not account for the complexities of real life, and that it requires leaps of faith as great or greater than those called for by religion." Finally, the preacher should "show at the very point of this particular narrative how Christianity offers far more powerful

51. Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 85-97.

52. Adams, *Truth Applied,* 131-37.

resources—not only for explaining but also for fulfilling the aspiration or dealing with the issue."[53] In addition to addressing the culture, Keller writes that sermon applications should touch the listener's heart—not simply the mind or the emotions, but what the person most loves and trusts and is committed to. He writes, "People, therefore, change not by merely changing their thinking but by changing what they love most…So the goal of the sermon cannot be merely to make the truth clear and understandable to the mind, but must also make it gripping and real to the heart."[54]

Capill's distinctive contribution is his emphasis on preaching to the listener's heart, the whole of the inner person, which includes the mind, the conscience, the will, and the passions.[55] Heart application "deals with our underlying attitudes, mind-set, motivations, aspirations, character, and goals…It tells us not only what to do but who we are, who we should be, and what by God's grace we can be."[56] Capill argues that it is important for preachers to tailor applications for the particular hearers in the congregation, taking note of "social, economic, personal, and cultural circumstances." However, Capill believes that it is even more important for the preacher to assess the spiritual conditions of the listeners—whether they are saved or not, growing or backsliding, overcoming or giving in to temptation, complacent or zealous in the faith.[57]

A common suggestion is that preachers picture several members of the congregation as they develop sermon applications. These members might represent

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53. Keller, *Preaching*, 115-17.

54. Keller, *Preaching,* 159-60.

55. Capill, *The Heart is the Target,* 112.

56. Capill, *The Heart is the Target,* 39.

57. Capill, *The Heart is the Target,* 130-33.

different demographics in terms of gender, age, profession, spiritual maturity, ethnicity, sub-culture, etc. The preacher can imagine how the biblical passage applies to each one, and some of these applications can be included in the sermon.

Steps Across the Bridge: The Process of Developing Sermon Application

As we have seen, there is broad consensus about the process for developing sermon application. This process involves considering the central theme of the biblical passage, its purpose, and its timeless principles. In addition, the preacher should consider the theological context of the biblical passage relative to contemporary listeners. Furthermore, the preacher should analyze the listeners before crafting application specifically for them.

Various writers have created step-by-step processes for developing sermon application. The number of steps and the wording of each differ from author to author. As the following summaries show, however, each is describing a similar process: a bridge from the biblical world into the contemporary world.

Carter, Duvall, and Hays write that the bridge between biblical text and contemporary application is theological principles. Before framing such theological principles, the preacher should "measure the width of the interpretive river" by identifying differences and similarities between the ancient recipients of the Scripture and the contemporary listeners to the sermon. The principles derived from the text should be timeless, universal, and transcultural. After drafting a theological principle, the preacher should consider how it is modified or qualified by the broader biblical and theological contexts of Scripture. Next in the process, the preacher can develop applications. To do so, the preacher should first "observe key elements of how the theological principles in the

text address the historical-cultural situation." Then the preacher finds a parallel situation in the contemporary context that includes all of those key elements. Finally, the preacher can develop specific applications fitting the parallel context.[58] For example, a key element of Philippians 4:13 ("I can do all this through him [Christ] who gives me strength") is that Paul was a Christian experiencing difficult circumstances because of his faithfulness to the gospel. A contemporary application should show that God will strengthen the listeners in a parallel situation where they also are experiencing difficulty for the sake of the gospel.[59]

Overdorf proposes a six-step process for developing sermon applications. The first two steps focus on the biblical passage: the preacher should determine its original message and original purpose. Overdorf notes that applications should flow from the unified message of the biblical text, not from individual elements of it. Next, the preacher compares the original audience with listeners. The preacher may need to abstract out a principle that covers both groups before applying that principle to the listeners. Overdorf encourages preachers to note the vision of God in the passage and the way that humanity rebels against that vision of God. Next, the preacher shifts focus to the listeners and asks what needs of theirs are addressed by the biblical teaching. For example, if the biblical teaching concerns Christian fellowship, the corresponding need might be loneliness. If the biblical teaching concerns God's grace, the corresponding need is the guilt of sin. Then, the preacher determines the purpose for the sermon—what the listeners should think, feel or do differently. [60]

58. Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word,* 60-65.

59. Carter, Duvall, and Hays, *Preaching God's Word*, 121.

60. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon,* 105-116.

Having determined the sermon purpose, the preacher then develops sermon applications by asking, "If the sermon accomplished its purpose in specific listeners dealing with specific life situations, how might it look?" Overdorf encourages preachers to consider specific individual listeners and also to consider the congregation as a community. The application sections of the sermon might include explanation or examples.[61]

Overdorf encourages preachers to check that their applications are both biblical and relevant by asking "safeguard" questions. Because certain applications tend to focus on only one aspect of God's character in a way that might diminish or caricature him, preachers should ask whether the application exalts God. Preachers should double check whether the application is consistent with the text's teaching and purpose, such that the original author would approve. Preachers should also consider whether the application will motivate and equip listeners to respond. Practical steps or an example can help. Finally, Overdorf encourages the preacher to ask whether the application makes promises that the Scripture does not (such as health or wealth for obedience) or places unbiblical expectations on the listeners (by raising suggestions for application to the level of God's command), which can lead to legalism.

Capill's process likewise moves from a text's original meaning to a "timeless truth" to application in the "here and now." Theology plays a role in discerning the timeless truth in that the relevance of Old Testament texts for us today is shaped by the work of Christ.[62] Capill calls his model the "living application process," whereby the living Word of God moves through the preacher's life into the lives of the hearers. Scripture, he writes, is used

61. Overdorf, *Applying the Sermon,* 123-28.

62. Capill, *The Heart is the Target*, 45-46.

for certain purposes: teaching/rebuking, training/correcting, testing/convicting, and exhorting/encouraging. The preacher should note how the sermon passage is used and draw out an application with the same purpose.[63]

John Koessler outlines a simple three-step process for developing sermon application. The first, "identify the application of the text," involves exegeting the text to identify its original meaning and then discerning the principle from which implication can be drawn for the listeners. The second step is to "exegete the audience." The preacher should find a need in contemporary life corresponding to the need the original audience had for the truth of the text. Koessler suggests that preachers consider *who* should respond to the truth, *what* should be their response, *how* they should respond, and *why* they should respond that way. The third step is to "inflect your applications." Koessler writes that preachers need to show the listeners the level of force that the applications in the sermon carry—whether necessary, probable, or possible.[64]

Similarly, in Jeffrey Arthurs' four-step process, the first step is to find the purpose or "telos" of the text. Second, the preacher should articulate the principle in the text using the "ladder of abstraction." Third, the preacher should analyze the audience to find points of similarity. Cultural analysis is one aspect of this step. Fourth, the preacher should apply the truth of the text with concrete images. Arthurs points out that application is not simply urging behavioral change but a broader category, which includes explaining, persuading,

63. Capill, *The Heart is the Target,* 260.

64. John Koessler, "Apply Your Message," in *Sermon Application,* ed. Matt Woodley (Carol Stream, IL: Preaching Today, undated e-book), 4-8, PDF edition.

motivating, and equipping. The applications should be specific so that the average listener can picture concrete images for how to live in light of the biblical truth.[65]

Cultural Intelligence for Sermon Application

The literature about sermon application does not address preaching in small places in particular. However, a helpful general approach to tailoring application for specific contexts is found in Matthew Kim's *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence.* Kim builds on the work of P. Christopher Early and Soon Ang, who wrote about cultural intelligence for use in business contexts. Early and Ang define cultural intelligence as "the capability to deal effectively with other people with whom the person does not share a common cultural background and understanding."[66] Kim draws on their insights in order to help preachers take cultural issues into account. Cultural intelligence, he argues, is a necessary skill for preachers to develop.[67]

Kim's model for culturally intelligent preaching follows three stages. Kim is careful to point out that preaching with cultural intelligence does not give license to distort the intended meaning of the biblical text, and so his model begins with careful exegesis. In addition to considering the passage's historical, grammatical, and literary context, the preacher should consider the author's cultural context. Importantly for application, the preacher should also consider the listeners' cultural context. In the second stage of his

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65. Jeffrey Arthurs, "The Fundamentals of Sermon Application" in *Interpretation and Application,* Craig Brian Larson, ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2012), 67-95.

66. P. Christopher Early and Soon Ang, *Cultural Intelligence: Individual Interactions across Cultures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 12, cited in Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence: Understanding the People Who Hear Our Sermons* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 5.

67. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence,* 9.

model, Kim suggests the following categories for the preacher to assess in building a bridge to the listeners (which form the acronym BRIDGE): beliefs, rituals, idols, dreams (including hopes, expectations, and fears), their view of God, and their experiences. [68]

In the third stage, the preacher takes God's Word into the listener's cultural context through the sermon. Kim shows that preachers can customize various aspects of their communication using the acronym DIALECT: their delivery (including sermon structure, tone, pathos, voice gestures, etc.), illustrations, application, language, and embrace (that is, exhibiting Christian love for people from other cultures), content (which reflects the listeners' concerns, not just the preacher's), and earning the listeners' trust. Kim warns that sermon applications should not violate the biblical author's intent. In order to make applications that are relevant to various culturally different listeners, Kim suggests seeking out applications both for individuals and for the church as a collective body (and other spheres of relationships). Preachers should also provide a balance of *being* versus *doing* applications, and they should make clear whether applications are necessary, probable, or possible.[69] Since listeners are not always ready to spring immediately into action, Kim encourages preachers to consider preparatory stages of application, such as when listeners reexamine old beliefs and consider the implications of making behavioral changes.[70]

68. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence,* 13-24.

69. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence,* 24-30.

70. Kim, *Preaching with Cultural Intelligence*, 149.

The Culture of Small Places

Little has been written specifically for preachers about the culture of listeners in rural areas or small towns. However, there has been lately a renewed interest in these areas among American cultural commentators,[71] and there are several recent books focused on rural and small town ministry published by Christian publishing houses.[72] The insights about rural and small town culture in this literature serve as a starting point for preachers who are seeking to understand their listeners in such contexts.

Glenn Daman provides insight into the culture of rural and small town America in his book *The Forgotten Church.* He writes that while many sociologists attempt to define "rural" by what it is not—that is, not urban or suburban, those who minister in these areas should seek to understand what it is. He describes "rurality" as characterized by isolation, both sparseness of the population and the distance from and lack of availability to goods and services. Rurality is also characterized by how people earn their living, which compared to urban environments is more closely tied to the land and its resources. Third, rurality is characterized by the values people share, including the importance of religion,

71. See the bibliographies in Glenn Daman, *The Forgotten Church: Why Rural Ministry Matters for Every Church in America* (Chicago: Moody, 2018) and Stephen Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places: Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2019). Notable studies about the problems facing American rural areas include Robert Wuthnow, *The Left Behind: Decline and Rage in Rural America,* 2d ed. (Princeton: University Press, 2019); Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kephalas, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means for America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009). Wuthnow has also written a more positive description of small town culture in *Small-Town America: Finding Community, Shaping the Future* (Princeton: University Press, 2013).

72. Besides the two works surveyed here, notable contributions about rural and small town ministry include Brad Roth, *God's Country: Faith, Hope, and the Future of the Rural Church* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2017); Donnie Griggs, *Small Town Jesus: Taking the Gospel Mission Seriously in Seemingly Unimportant Places* (Damascus, MD: Evertruth, 2016); and Ronnie Martin and Donnie Griggs, *Pastoring Small Towns: Help and Hope for Those Ministering in Smaller Places* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2023).

self-control, and social conservatism.[73] In describing the differences between the rural and urban church cultures, Daman writes, "The rural church focuses primarily upon developing and maintaining community and relationships, while the urban church is driven more by casting vision and carrying it out through various forms of mission. This does not mean, however, that the rural church neglects vision and mission, or that the urban church neglects community and relationships. Rather, both the rural and urban church typically order their priorities differently, and their understandings and embodiment of those priorities take on different forms."[74] Rural communities are typically more religious than urbanites and less likely to adopt the pluralism of postmodernism. However, certain spiritual dangers are more prevalent, including that "the error of traditionalism is legalism and self-reliance."[75]

Daman describes some of the positive values as well as the problems typical of rural culture. According to Daman, rural culture places great importance on the land. While urban people think of rural land as recreational areas to be preserved, rural people think of the land as a resource to steward. Rural people also value the multigenerational family unit as the center of life. They carry a sense of responsibility for the community in which they live. They are more traditional than urbanites in their desire to carry on the values received from previous generations and pass them on to the next. As such, there is pressure to conform to those values. Religion is important to rural people, even though many do not

73. Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 34-35.

74. Daman, *The Forgotten Church,* 37.

75. Daman, *The Forgotten Church,* 38.

attend church. Daman stresses that rural areas need evangelism just as much as cities.[76] The problems plaguing rural communities include poverty, a lack of access to adequate health care, and racism. Daman points out rural areas are more racially diverse and complex than often understood. He writes that rural Americans largely reject the overt prejudice of white supremacist groups, "yet what they fail to see is the structural racism existing within the country that remains invisible to whites, but is plain to people of color."[77]

In *A Big Gospel in Small Places,* Stephen Witmer encourages pastors to persevere in ministry in "small places," places that are small in terms of population, economic power, and cultural influence, including small towns and rural areas.[78] He notes that more than 75 percent of land area in the United States is rural. Witmer compares these places to typical expectations about them. He writes that small places are better than people expect them to be. Among city folks, small places are often forgotten or despised. (Both Daman and Witmer refer to Barak Obama's observation of small town communities when he was running for President in 2008: "So it's not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations." Many small town residents perceive such remarks as condescending.) Witmer explains that the natural resources and people from these areas are used in ways that benefit cities rather than the areas and communities they come from. Yet, small places are wonderful places to live—full of natural beauty,

76. Daman, *The Forgotten Church*, 82-90.

77. Daman, *The Forgotten Church,* 112.

78. Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places,* 22-23.

resilient and optimistic people, strong communities, and shared values—such that sociologists find residents of rural areas to be happier overall than residents of cities. Witmer makes the point that God values these places and people more than we do.[79]

On the other hand, Witmer writes, "small places are worse than we think." Small places are losing economic opportunities and population to cities. Drug abuse and suicide rates are high. Witmer describes a cultural ethos of helplessness and hopelessness among a portion of rural residents. Such people see themselves as victims, unable to improve their lives, and so ignore their problems or fall into despair. Witmer challenges Christians to bring into small places the hope of Jesus's good news.[80]

Conclusion

This review of the literature about sermon application has shown that, in contrast to certain approaches outside evangelicalism, evangelicals agree that application is essential to preaching. The sermon forms a bridge from the biblical world into the contemporary world. Crossing the bridge, which spans a cultural divide, presents difficult hermeneutical and practical challenges. Evangelical homileticians propose various pathways across the bridge. One proposal is to derive a general principle from the main theme of the Scripture passage and then apply it in the contemporary context. Another proposal is to discern the author's purpose behind the inclusion of the passage and to develop applications following that same purpose for the listeners. Other writers propose situating the Scripture in its theological context—whether systematic theology, biblical theology, or the theology of the

79. Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places,* 28-42.

80. Witmer, *A Big Gospel in Small Places,* 43-58.

pericope—and thereby relating the Scripture's message to the listeners in their theological context. Evangelical homileticians furthermore make suggestions for how preachers can exegete their listeners in addition to the Scripture text. Preachers should seek to understand their listeners' cultural context and spiritual needs. Although little has been written recently about preaching in small town and rural contexts, tools exist for helping preachers develop cultural intelligence, and recent literature provides cultural analysis of small places that is helpful for preachers.

How are preachers in small places currently facing the challenges of sermon application? How does current praxis relate to the recommendations of the writers surveyed in this chapter? Certain preachers might follow one of the paths described here, they might follow different paths for different sermons, or they might take a unique approach. How, in current praxis, do preachers in small places take their cultural context into account as they develop sermon applications? The next chapter will outline the design of a research project investigating the current practice of sermon application in the small places of eastern Connecticut.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESEARCH METHODS

Introduction

The task of developing sermon application presents many questions and options for the preacher. After interpreting the original meaning of the Scripture passage, the preacher asks, "Now what?" What does God want this congregation to do in light of this Scripture? And what should the preacher tell the listeners about changing their lives? This thesis-project is born out of a desire to aid preachers in this task of developing sermon application.

Chapter 1 of this thesis-project introduced some of the questions and options related to sermon application. How does the preacher ground the application in the meaning of the Scripture? How does the preacher develop applications that are relevant to the present group of listeners, taking into consideration their spiritual needs and cultural setting? How general or specific should the sermon applications be? Chapter 1 also introduced the cultural setting of "small places"—places with little economic or cultural influence, especially small towns and rural communities. The small places of rural eastern Connecticut will be the setting for studying sermon application in this thesis-project.

Chapter 2 showed that the task of sermon application begins with certain biblical and theological convictions about the nature of God's Word and how God uses it to change people. God speaks to us through his inerrant and authoritative Word, even as it is proclaimed in preaching. As a result, as people respond to God's Word in faith and obedience, they are saved from sin and grow as Jesus' disciples.

Chapter 3 reviewed literature concerning sermon application, focusing on the hermeneutical bridge between Bible and contemporary people in their cultural contexts. Evangelical homileticians, in various ways, cross this hermeneutical bridge by taking into account the Scripture passage's central theme, purpose, principles, and theological context. There is a need to compare and contrast the contemporary hearers with the Scripture's original audience, in terms of both theological and cultural context. The chapter concluded with a preliminary exploration of the culture of "small places" in North America. As Chapter 3 shows, there has been little written specifically about preaching in small towns and rural communities.

Now, in Chapter 4, the original research project will be described. The project is a qualitative analysis of the practice of sermon application among a sample of evangelical pastors serving in a specific cultural context: the small towns of the "Last Green Valley" in rural eastern Connecticut.

Aims of the Research

As a pastor in a small New England town, I embarked on this thesis-project with the desire of growing in the task of developing sermon applications for my church and using what I might learn to serve the pastors of other local churches in this area. It is hoped that the project might also benefit other pastors in similar cultural contexts, the "small places" of North America more broadly, in their work in applying the Scriptures in preaching. Furthermore, it is hoped that this project might provide a model for researching sermon application in other cultural contexts.

In order to aid preachers as they develop sermon applications in a specific cultural context, it would be helpful to understand their current practice. As such, the three main research questions this project seeks to answer are the following:

(1) What kinds of applications are presented in sermons by pastors of evangelical congregations in the small towns of eastern Connecticut?

(2) How do these pastors approach the task of developing sermon application in terms of linking the application to the Scripture text?

(3) What role does cultural context play in these sermon applications?

Thus, the aim of this research is to identify and describe the current practice of sermon application in evangelical churches in the small towns of eastern Connecticut. While this project aims simply to describe the current practice of sermon application in one cultural setting, it is hoped that this research could lead to practical outcomes or to future research projects that build on it. Proposals for future projects and research will be described in Chapter 5.

Research Method

Two research methods were employed in this research. First, I listened to a sample of sermons delivered by pastors of evangelical churches in small towns in eastern Connecticut. I set out to listen to a sermon by fifteen to twenty different pastors in this area, and I ended up listening to eighteen. After listening to the sermons, I sought to identify and describe the applications in those sermons, the way the applications linked to the Scripture texts, and any role local culture played in the applications.

Second, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each pastor. In the semi-structured interviews, I asked the pastors about their approach to developing application in the selected sermon and in general. In addition, I asked the pastors to describe the role of local culture in their approach to developing sermon application. Finally, I asked the pastors to describe their observations about the culture of the small towns in eastern Connecticut.

Churches and Sermons Studied

Relying on previous personal acquaintance and on Internet searches using Google Maps, I compiled a list of twenty-eight evangelical churches within a thirty-mile radius of Canterbury, Connecticut:

Baptist Fellowship Church, Columbia
Christian Fellowship Church, Scotland
Congregational Church of Eastford, Eastford
Eastford Baptist Church, Eastford
FaithWay Community Church, Killingly
First Congregational Church, Pomfret Center
First Congregational Church, Windham Center
Gospel Light Christian Fellowship, Plainfield
Green Valley Crossing, Putnam
Hebron Church of Hope, Hebron
Lighthouse Church of God, Plainfield
Line Baptist Church, Foster, Rhode Island
Living Proof Church, Ashford
New Life Assembly, Griswold
North Stonington Baptist Church, North Stonington
North Stonington Bible Church, North Stonington
Norwich Alliance Church, Norwich
Packerville Baptist Church, Plainfield
Preston Bible Church, Preston
Quinebaug River Church, Jewett City
Revelation Church, Bozrah
South Woodstock Baptist Church, Woodstock
Sovereign Grace Christian Church, Canterbury
St. Paul's Church, Willington

The Federated Church of Willington, Willington
The Congregational Church of Salem, Salem
Voluntown Baptist Church, Voluntown
Woodstock Evangelical Covenant Church, Woodstock

The location within thirty miles of Canterbury was chosen because all of these churches are located in small towns in eastern Connecticut, part of The Last Green Valley National Heritage Corridor described in Chapter 1.[1] These communities share a local character and culture. In addition, the proximity of the churches facilitated the research. I am the pastor of a church in Canterbury, so I could travel easily to these churches in order to interview the pastors. In compiling the list, I did not include churches in the downtown areas of Willimantic and Norwich, even though those cities are within the thirty-mile radius of Canterbury, in order to focus on churches in locations with a small-town character rather than those in such densely populated areas.

The study was limited to sermon application in evangelical churches, defined for this project as churches that affirm the doctrine of scriptural inerrancy. Each church on the list, by my assessment, is likely to be evangelical. This assessment is based on a personal acquaintance with the pastor's doctrinal convictions (I have met some of the pastors through a local pastors' prayer group) or because the church (as far as can be ascertained from its website) is part of an evangelical denomination or tradition.[2] When inviting each

1. One church on the list, Line Baptist Church, is not located in Connecticut but in Foster, Rhode Island. Its name comes from the town's proximity to the Connecticut border. Foster is located within the thirty-mile radius of Canterbury and is culturally similar to the other towns on the list.

2. The history and tradition of the churches whose pastors participated in this project will be briefly described below. Most of the churches on this list are associated with evangelical denominations or are independent churches in Baptist, Congregational, or Pentecostal traditions. Three of the churches are evangelical congregations within mainline denominations.

pastor to participate in the project, I asked the pastor to confirm that the church is an evangelical church as defined above.

I contacted pastors of the churches on the list by telephone in order to invite them to participate in the research. My goal was that fifteen to twenty pastors would be willing to participate. I asked each pastor willing to participate to select a sermon he delivered in May through August of 2022 to be the subject of the research.[3] The sermons would have to have been recorded either by video or audio recording device and made available to me. As it so happens, after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic if not before, all of the churches on the list have made recordings of sermons available online, whether on the church website, church Facebook page, or YouTube channel. Such availability facilitated this research project.

Thus, the sermons which are the subject of this research are similar in the following ways:

- Cultural and geographical setting – delivered in churches in small towns of eastern Connecticut
- Theological conviction – delivered by pastors of evangelical churches
- Date – delivered in May through August of 2022
- Availability – recorded and posted online

Ethical Permissions

The Institutional Review Board at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary determined that this project posed little risk to the pastors as participants. As viewed by

3. Masculine pronouns will be used for the pastors, who are all male, whose sermons are the subject of this research.

the board, this project evaluates a program (i.e., the preaching ministry) of a non-vulnerable population (the pastors).

The pastors were asked to sign an informed consent form before participating in the project. A copy of the form is attached in Appendix A. It states that I would seek to protect the confidentiality of the pastors by using aliases in this thesis-project when referring to them in connection with their sermons and their interviews. Furthermore, identifying information would be redacted from the sermon transcripts appended to this thesis-project. The informed consent form makes clear that there are no anticipated risks or personal benefits from participating and that participation in the project is voluntary.

The Sermons

As mentioned above, my goal was that fifteen to twenty pastors would be willing to participate and thus that number of sermons would be the subject of the research. During the late spring and summer of 2022, I reached out to eighteen of the pastors on the list by telephone and explained the project to them. All eighteen pastors agreed to participate in the study. I asked each one to select a sermon he delivered in his church in May to August of 2022 to be the subject of the research. The sermon would need to be available in recorded form (either in audio or video format) and representative of the pastor's typical preaching.

I listened to or watched the recorded sermons and made notes about them as described below. After I listened to eighteen sermons and interviewed the pastors, I concluded that there was enough data to analyze for the purposes of this project, and so I did not contact the pastors of the other churches on the list. Transcripts of the sermons,

lightly redacted to remove identifying information, are attached in Appendix B to the thesis-project. I used the following table to analyze each sermon, filling in notes in the appropriate boxes regarding material mentioned in the sermon. These notes are not appended to the thesis-project but were consulted to write a presentation of outcomes in Chapter 5.

Table 1: Sermon Analysis Grid

Sermon title	
Sermon date and location	
Preacher	
Scripture text	
"Big Idea" of Scripture (if mentioned)	
Applications (note whom the application is directed toward—believer/unbeliever, individual/church body/other group, etc.)	
Change of beliefs	
Change of emotions, attitudes	
Actions to be taken	
Other	

Primary application, if any	
Links from Scripture to application (note whether stated or implied)	
Purpose	
Principles	
Theological context	
Other	
Mention of contemporary cultural context	

After taking notes on all the sermons, I consulted the notes, sometimes referring back to the audio recordings, to analyze the sample of sermons as a whole, focusing on the three research questions mentioned in the "Aims of Research" section above. I identified the main application or applications in each sermon and looked for broad themes in the data that would lead to answering the research questions.

For the first research question about the nature of sermon applications in the small towns of eastern Connecticut, I summarized and described the applications in each sermon. I noted the place of the applications within the structure of the sermons. I then grouped the

applications into categories. I noted whether the sermon applications focused on changes in beliefs, changes in attitudes and emotions, or changes in actions. I calculated the number of sermons that employed applications from each category. In addition, I noted to whom the applications were directed—whether believers or unbelievers, whether individuals, the church as a whole, other groups, etc. In addition, I described which spheres of life the applications touched upon.

The second research question concerns the links between Scripture text and sermon application. Chapter 3 showed that the evangelical homileticians have proposed several ways to cross the bridge from Scripture text to application. These ways include identifying the text's purpose, its principles, and its theological context. For each sermon, I sought to identify whether the applications fell into those categories or into other categories. After placing the approach of each sermon into some category, I described and summarized the findings. I also noted whether the preachers explicitly drew attention in the sermons to the link from the Scripture text to the application or whether such links were implied.

Finally, I examined the data in order to answer the third question about the role of local culture in sermon applications. Of course, culture is ubiquitous, and so every sentence of every sermon involves culture in some way. However, I noted the degree to which preachers explicitly drew attention to their local community and its way of life.

The Semi-Structured Interviews

I listened to the sermon by the pastor to be interviewed shortly before the interview, so that the sermon was fresh in my memory. The interviews took place in the

pastor's office, my office, or in another quiet location. I made audio recordings of the interviews for my reference.

The following broad outline was used to guide the semi-structured interviews:

Table 2: Questions for Semi-Structured Interviews

1. Background on pastor, church, and town

- How you came to serve here, how long, etc.
- Description of church
- Description of town

2. The selected sermon

- The applications of the Scripture text in the sermon
- How did you develop these applications?
- What do you see as the connection between the Scripture text and the application?
- Were you considering certain needs of the listeners?
- Were you considering the cultural context of the listeners?

3. Sermon application generally

- How do you approach sermon application as you prepare your sermons?
- Are there certain ways you think about the connection between the Scripture text and the application (purpose, principles, theological context, etc.)?
- In preparing your sermons, how do you take the needs of your listeners into account?

4. Local culture

- What are a couple of aspects of the culture of your town that would be helpful for a

beginning pastor to know about it? What about the culture of the church?

- How does the culture of this community factor into what you say in your sermons?
- At what point in your sermon preparation do you consider local culture?

The pastors' answers are summarized in Chapter 5. When referring to the pastors' answers, aliases are used to protect their confidentiality. My analysis of the interview answers focused on the second and third research questions.

For answering the second research question about the link between the Scripture text and the sermon application, I made notes summarizing each pastor's answers about his approach with regard to the selected sermon and in general. After all of the interviews were completed, I compared and categorized the pastors' various answers. I wrote a summary of their answers and included several interesting quotations.

For the third research question about the role of local culture in sermon application, I made notes of each pastor's answers. I summarized the pastors' descriptions of whether and how they consider the culture and needs of their listeners. I also summarized the pastors' observations about the culture of the small towns in eastern Connecticut and their recommendations for communicating to listeners in this area.

Offering Evaluations

The main purpose of the research project is to understand the current practice of sermon application in eastern Connecticut. As such, most of the space in Chapter 5 is devoted to summarizing the sermon applications and the pastors' answers in the interviews. In addition, however, after describing the current practice, Chapter 5 includes

my evaluation of the state of the current practice. Based on the research, I offer suggestions for good practice of sermon application in small places.

Introduction to the Preachers and Churches

As mentioned above, eighteen pastors agreed to participate in the research project. (Concluding that these pastors provided sufficient data to complete the project, I did not contact the pastors of the remaining churches on the list.) A brief introduction to each pastor participating in the study and their churches is provided below. While this section uses the pastors' real names, aliases are used in the next chapter and in the sermon transcripts in Appendix B.

Baptist Fellowship Church, Columbia. Baptist Fellowship Church, part of the Southern Baptist Convention, was planted in the 1970s by a pastor from Missouri with a gift for evangelism. Pastor Brian Keldson, a Colorado native, began serving the church as an associate pastor in 2005 and became the senior pastor when the founding pastor retired. He holds a Master of Divinity from Golden Gate (now Gateway) Theological Seminary and is now pursuing a doctorate in Christian Education. Besides serving the church, he recently began bi-vocational work as a hospice counselor. Pastor Dennis Reiter serves the church as associate pastor. A graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, he has had a long career in ministry, previously serving as pastor of Storrs Community Church, as a seminary professor, and as a counselor with Peacemaker Ministries. Both pastors agreed to participate in this thesis-project. Pastor Brian describes Columbia as a "sleepy" town with a population of about 5,000. Many people work in nearby towns for defense contractors that build submarines and jets.

Congregational Church of Eastford, Eastford. The Congregational Church of Eastford traces its lineage to English Puritanism, the established religion of colonial Connecticut. Founded in 1777, the church has never been part of a denomination. In the mid-twentieth century, the church drifted toward liberalism until a Bible-teaching pastor brought it back to its theological roots. Pastor Mike Moran, the fifth pastor since that time, has served the church for eighteen years. He studied at Bethel Seminary of the East and began vocational ministry after a career as a Navy pilot and work in the aerospace industry. He describes Eastford as a quiet, small town, politically conservative, and economically diverse.

FaithWay Community Church, Killingly. Pastor Adrian Ferrari served as a missionary in Argentina and then briefly as the pastor of another local church in Connecticut before starting FaithWay Community Church just over two years ago. The church began with a core of people, he says, who had experienced "church hurt" from negative experiences in other churches. The church started independently and has now joined the Southern Baptist Convention. Initially meeting in a rented space in Canterbury, the fellowship soon bought and renovated a vacant church building in Killingly, one of the larger small towns of the area, with a population around 17,000. Pastor Adrian grew up in Chicago and holds a Master of Arts from Baptist Bible Seminary at Clarks Summit University.

First Congregational Church, Pomfret Center. Established in 1715 with Puritan roots, the First Congregational Church in Pomfret Center is now part of the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference. Pastor Thomas Crumb is grateful to serve a fellowship that has had a faithful gospel witness for so many years. He trusted Christ as a

graduate student of music at Yale, and he has served in vocational ministry for forty years, including thirteen in Pomfret. His Master of Divinity degree is from the Conservative Baptist Seminary of the East. He said that while Pomfret is home to two highly rated private prep schools, the town is not otherwise a white-collar community. There are different levels of education among the people who make up the church.

First Congregational Church, Windham Center. The First Congregational Church of Windham Center was established in 1700. After drifting into liberalism, in 1986 the congregation reaffirmed its commitment to the Scriptures, the gospel, and the need for a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. At that time the church left the United Churches of Christ denomination, and it remains independent. Pastor Jim Beesley, who studied at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and was ordained by the Conservative Congregational Christian Conference, began serving the church in 1988. He describes Windham Center as a small, blue-collar village just outside Willimantic, an inner-city hub within a rural area. The village is home to an older population, the second generation of people with little exposure to church or the gospel.

Green Valley Crossing, Putnam. Church planting Pastor Riley Prather, a native of Oklahoma, moved to Putnam in 2012 and launched Green Valley Crossing in 2013. He holds a Master of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and he came to New England with the Send Network. The church is part of the Southern Baptist Convention and has a contemporary style, meeting in a renovated storefront space. Pastor Riley says that Putnam used to be small mill town but is now a mixture of rural and suburban areas with urban problems related to economic depression.

Hebron Church of Hope, Hebron. The Church of Hope was founded by the town of Hebron in 1716 and has an exciting history. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitfield both preached there during the Great Awakening. The church eventually drifted into liberalism, but in the 1980s, an evangelical pastor led it out of the United Churches of Christ and back to its theological roots. Pastor Jordan Brown, a native of Colchester, Connecticut, served as an associate pastor at Baptist Fellowship Church in Columbia before taking the position of lead pastor at the Church of Hope in 2017. He holds a Master of Divinity from Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He describes the small town of Hebron as a suburb to Glastonbury and Hartford. With a population around 10,000, Hebron is home to many young families who work in banking and insurance as well as older people who work in farming and blue collar occupations.

Lighthouse Church of God, Plainfield. The Lighthouse Church was founded in 1989 in Plainfield and is part of the Church of God, a Pentecostal denomination committed to missions. Pastor Lane Lavender holds multiple degrees from universities associated with the Church of God. He served as pastor in several other churches in his denomination before coming to Plainfield from North Carolina about ten years ago. The Lighthouse Church is a growing congregation, diverse in terms of ages and ethnicity. Pastor Lane describes Plainfield as a quiet, slow-paced town, politically conservative, and economically lower to middle class. Many people who live in Plainfield are family oriented and enjoy the quiet and safety of the community, and so they are willing to commute elsewhere for work.

Line Baptist Church, Foster, Rhode Island. The Union Free Baptist Church was started in Foster in the 1860s. Because of its location on the Connecticut-Rhode Island Border, it was nicknamed Line Baptist Church. A century ago, the nickname became its

official name. In 1972, the church left the American Baptist Church denomination over the issue of homosexuality, and it remains independent. Pastor Charles Fields began serving the church, which had dwindled to only a couple of families, in 2012. The congregation has now outgrown its main auditorium and meets for worship in the larger fellowship hall space. Pastor Charles grew up in Chicago and attended Bible college and seminary before moving to New England. Foster is a conservative, sparsely populated town of fewer than 5,000 people. Pastor Charles says that many residents are well-educated, middle class folks who commute to large cities such as Providence for work or own small business.

Living Proof Church, Ashford. In 1993, two Baptist churches in Ashford merged to form United Baptist Church. Those churches were Ashford Baptist Church, established in 1780, and Warrenville Baptist Church, which had been founded as South Center Baptist Church in 1848 and changed its name in 1926. In 2014, the church changed its name to Living Proof Church in order to reflect its value of love as proof of being Jesus' disciples. Pat McCue attended the church as a child, volunteered as a youth leader, served as youth pastor for ten years, and then became senior pastor fifteen years ago. He says that he has no formal training, but his library gives evidence of careful study of the Bible and theology. Ashford is a picturesque rural town of about 4,500 people. Since the town has no local industry, many residents commute elsewhere for work. Pastor Pat says Ashford's main value is education. The town's leaders tend to be politically liberal and have little interest in religion.

Packerville Baptist Church, Plainfield. Packerville Baptist Church was founded in 1828. Throughout its history, it has been a small congregation with a bi-vocational pastor. Once part of the American Baptist Church denomination, it is now independent. Pastor Ed

Connolly has served the church for seven years. Vocational ministry is his third career. He retired from the United States Marine Corps after twenty-five years of service and then worked as a corrections officer, retiring from the Department of Justice after twenty-one years of service. He also studied at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He says that in the small town of Plainfield, everybody knows everybody. He began sharing information about the church on Facebook groups for Plainfield residents, and thus the church has enjoyed an influx of visitors, some of whom have become members.

Preston Bible Church, Preston. Preston Bible Church began in 1815 as Preston Baptist Church. In the twentieth century, the church stood in the fundamentalist and dispensationalist traditions. Pastor David Roseland is a native Texan who attended the United States Military Academy at West Point and served in Afghanistan as an army officer. Later, he graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. He came to Preston Bible Church in 2007. He is currently pursuing a doctorate in theology, and he teaches seminary courses online in Hebrew and theology. Alluding to Tolkien's *The Hobbit,* he calls Preston "the shire," where people keep to themselves and talk about each other. Many Preston residents work in agriculture, construction, for one of the nearby casinos, or for military contractors such as Electric Boat, which builds submarines.

Sovereign Grace Christian Church, Canterbury. Sovereign Grace Christian Church was founded as the Westminster Congregational Church in 1770, because the residents of Westminster, a small village on the west side of Canterbury, found it difficult to travel in winter to the church on the town green. A highlight of its long history is the church's participation in the Second Great Awakening. Recently, among its many small group ministries, the church began hosting a group for native Spanish speakers. Pastor David

Gladden came to the church in 2003. He previously served in a Christian library ministry. He is an ardent student and teacher of church history and Reformed theology. He describes Canterbury as spiritually indifferent. However, he says, Sovereign Grace Christian Church has remained a small but faithful Christian presence.

St. Paul's Church, Willington. St. Paul's Church was started near the University of Connecticut campus in 2005 by two young men with a background in Young Life ministry. The nondenominational congregation attracted many college students and grew rapidly. Suddenly both pastors left the church when one of them was found to be involved in sexual sin. Although many people left, the remaining members carried on the ministry. In 2016, Pastor Ryan Spooner came to serve the church. A Connecticut native, he had graduated from the University of Connecticut, served as a staff member with Cru, and earned a Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. The church now meets for worship in a renovated mill space in Willington. Many members are associated in some way with UConn. Pastor Ryan and the church consider the ideologically diverse university, more than the Town of Willington, as their main mission field.

The Federated Church of Willington, Willington. In 1910, two historic churches in Willington—a Congregational church founded in 1727 and a Baptist church founded in 1828—merged to form The Federated Church. The fellowship still maintains two buildings, meeting in one in summer and the other in winter. The church had dwindled in size before Pastor Nate Oliver began serving in 2015. His work of renewing the Federated Church focuses on expositional Bible preaching. Many families with young children have recently joined the congregation. Before coming to Willington, Pastor Nate went to seminary and worked as a church-planting pastor. He says that Willington, a small town ten minutes from

the University of Connecticut campus, is home to an interesting mix of people, both blue collar and white collar, politically liberal and conservative.

Voluntown Baptist Church, Voluntown. Voluntown Baptist Church began in 1832 as a branch of the Packerville Baptist Church. It is part of the American Baptist Church denomination. Pastor Andrzej Korytkowski is currently serving as interim pastor. He grew up in Poland and served several years as the director of a Christian campground there. Besides serving the church in Connecticut, he continues to be involved with the camp in Poland, gathering resources and leading teams on mission trips. Voluntown is a quiet, green town next to the Pachaug State Forest.

Woodstock Evangelical Covenant Church, Woodstock. The Evangelical Covenant Church in Woodstock, like many congregations in that denomination, was founded by Swedish immigrants in the late 1800s. Pastor Leon Engman holds masters and doctoral degrees from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church. He is also an author and a former Air Force navigator. He describes Woodstock, where landowners and mill owners once lived, as a more wealthy community than the surrounding towns. However, due to economic changes, many young people have left the area to find work elsewhere. Those who remain tend to be older and well educated.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the design of a project examining the current practice of sermon application in the small towns of eastern Connecticut. First, the applications in a sample of eighteen sermons by evangelical pastors serving here were analyzed. Second, those pastors described their approach to sermon application in semi-structured

interviews. The next chapter will present the results of the research. Based on the research, I will offer a brief evaluation of the current practice as well as suggestions for preachers who develop sermon application in small places.

CHAPTER FIVE

OUTCOMES

Introduction

The original research for this thesis-project is aimed toward understanding the current practice of sermon application by evangelical pastors in the small towns of eastern Connecticut. The three main research questions this project seeks to answer are the following:

(1) What kinds of applications are presented in sermons by pastors of evangelical congregations in the small towns of eastern Connecticut?

(2) How do these pastors approach the task of developing sermon application in terms of linking the application to the Scripture text?

(3) What role does cultural context play in these sermon applications?

The last chapter set forth the design of the project. I set out to listen to sermons delivered by fifteen to twenty different pastors in eastern Connecticut in the late spring and summer of 2022. I sought also to conduct semi-structured interviews with those pastors, asking them about their approach to sermon application.

From a list of twenty-eight evangelical churches in small towns of eastern Connecticut, I made contact by telephone with eighteen pastors. All eighteen pastors agreed to participate in the project. I listened to a sermon by each of those pastors (usually the most recent sermon preached by the pastor before the date of the interview) and made notes about the sermon applications using the template included in Chapter 4. I conducted the interviews from May to August of 2022, using the questions listed in Chapter 4 and

taking notes on the pastors' answers. Each interview lasted between 35 and 50 minutes and was audio recorded for my reference. After conducting eighteen interviews, there was enough data to complete the project. The pastors of the remaining churches on the list were not contacted.

As such, the data forming the basis for the results presented here consists of the sermons themselves and the pastors' responses in the interviews. By consulting notes made on the sermons and the interviews, and at times referring back to the audio recordings, I categorized and organized the data according to the three research questions. The results of the research are presented below.

First, a summary of the principal application in each of the eighteen sermons is presented as well as an analysis of the applications in the group of sermons. Second, the way that the pastors link their sermon applications to the Scripture texts is summarized. Third, the way that the pastors consider their listeners' needs and culture in crafting sermon application is presented. Finally, some conclusions and proposals are offered for the practice of sermon application in small places.

A Description of the Sermon Applications

This section provides a summary of the principal applications in each sermon. These summaries are based on my analysis of the sermons rather than the pastors' descriptions of their sermons. In order to provide some confidentiality, aliases are used for the pastors in this chapter and in the sermon transcripts in the appendix.

Pastor Andrew. Pastor Andrew's sermon was based on John 1:43-51, the account of Philip bringing Nathanael to see Jesus. The sermon included doctrinal teaching about God's

work in salvation, God's omniscience, and Jesus' deity. An implied application was that the listeners change or strengthen their beliefs to conform to this truth. The primary direct application concerned the listeners' approach to evangelism. They should pray for unbelievers they know, tell them to "come and see" Jesus, and leave the rest to God, in the sense that they should not try to force conversions or argue people into God's kingdom. This primary application, a call to action, was directed towards individual believers within the church body. Pastor Andrew mainly framed the application as a description. Rather than evangelizing through argument, "You invite somebody into your life so he or she can watch Jesus doing something in your life. Just simply, 'Come and see.'"

Pastor Ben. The sermon was based on Luke 7:18-23, a conversation between John the Baptist's messengers and Jesus, in which they ask him whether he is the expected Messiah. Pastor Ben compared John the Baptist's doubts to the listeners' doubts about the future, other people, themselves, and God. Multiple illustrations of how the listeners experience doubt communicated that the pastor empathized with their struggles. The main application was to "doubt your doubts" by believing God's Word. Secondarily, in order to hear God's Word taught accurately, the listeners should be part of a Bible-believing church. As such, the intention of the main application was a change in the listeners' attitudes and emotions so that they would feel more certainty in what they believe. Pastor Ben framed the application, directed to individual believers, as a direct command.

Pastor Carlos. The sermon was based on Hebrews 11:17-20, a description of Abraham and Isaac's faith. Pastor Carlos focused on Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Using probing questions, he called on his listeners to identify the "Isaacs" in their lives, which he defined as "those things which prevent people from obeying God." Pastor Carlos told the

listeners to surrender those things to God. An example of an "Isaac" for an unbeliever is religion, depending on one's own goodness in order to reach God. Surrendering that "Isaac" involves trusting in Christ instead. An example of an "Isaac" for a believer is the choice of a spouse. Surrendering in that example would mean marrying only a Christian rather than an unbeliever. Thus, the application was directed toward individual listeners, both believers and unbelievers. The call to change focused on inner heart attitudes, although such a change affects choices and actions.

Pastor Daniel. The outline of Pastor Daniel's sermon on maintaining unity in the church, based on Ephesians 4:1-3, adhered closely to the Scripture text. First, the manner of maintaining unity is through humility, gentleness, and patience. Second, the means of maintaining unity is through bearing with one another and through eagerly pursuing unity. Pastor Daniel defined each term or idea and then made an application involving church body life. An application for humility is to have an attitude of deference towards other people's preferences and to seek to serve them rather than being served. For gentleness, church members should seek to understand each other by asking questions before they seek to win arguments. For patience, the church members should commit to staying in the church for decades. When it comes to bearing with one another, church members should maintain friendships with those whose faults annoy them, although they should understand that at some point the church must discipline those who persist in unrepentant sin. As an application for "making every effort" to maintain unity, Pastor Daniel shared several suggestions out of a book about church membership, including inviting people together who don't know one another. All these applications were aimed towards the local church community and involved changes in both attitudes and actions.

Pastor Ethan. The sermon, based on Romans 6:1-4, was a meditation on the concept of "newness of life." Pastor Ethan began with doctrinal teaching on the meaning of union with Christ. He used questions to lead the listeners in reflecting on whether or not they had acknowledged their sin and trusted in Christ. He then used illustrations and scenarios to show that believers' union with Christ gives them a new quality of life. They now can have confidence to face temptations, struggles, and the future, including death. The application was thus framed as a description of the new quality of life that is a current reality for believers but that they are invited to experience more fully by faith. Thus, the sermon contained applications both for those individual listeners who had not yet trusted in Christ and for believers.

Pastor Forrest. The sermon was based on John 3:1-21, Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus about the new birth. Pastor Forrest delivered a detailed exposition, explaining nuances of the Greek text, so that his listeners would be able to have a correct understanding of the concept of "new birth." Although the phrase is typically misunderstood in American culture, "new birth" means that God begets a person as his own child. The sermon's main application for unbelievers was to believe in Christ and receive this new birth. The main application for believers in Christ was to understand how God loved us, by sending his Son to die a gruesome death for us (Pastor Forrest described crucifixion in detail). Thus, listeners can have confidence in God's love when they are tempted to doubt it. The applications in the sermon were directed toward individual listeners and focused mainly on correct understanding as a basis for faith.

Pastor Garrett. In this exposition of Galatians 3:15-18, Pastor Garrett explained the difference between God's promise and God's law, showing that the believer's standing

before God depends on God's promise, not the person's performance. The listeners should stop thinking that their standing before God fluctuates based on their obedience, like stock prices. The application focused on the listeners' understanding and belief in doctrinal truths, yet there were implications not just for listeners' minds but also their hearts. Pastor Garrett called on the listeners to be encouraged that, as heirs of God's promises, they receive innumerable benefits. Believers in Christ abide in Christ, have freedom in the Holy Spirit, bear fruit for God, and will spend eternity with God. Thus, the application was directed toward individual listeners and their understanding of their relationship with God.

Pastor Hudson. Pastor Hudson's sermon was based on Luke 16:19-31, Jesus' story about the poor beggar and the rich man, whose positions of relative prosperity were reversed after death. The application was directed towards unbelievers or nominal believers. While many people today deny or ignore the reality of heaven and hell, the listeners should not be complacent about eternity. Rather, they should believe in the reality of heaven and hell, turn from sin, and trust in Christ for salvation. Pastor Hudson pleaded with his listeners to accept these difficult truths. As an aside, he said that parents and churches should teach these things to youth, rather than simply entertain them.

Pastor Isaac. This sermon was an installment in a series about the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26). Its theme was peace, and it referenced several biblical texts. Pastor Isaac first explained that Christ's death makes it possible for people to have peace with God. He directed an application toward unbelievers, inviting them to have peace with God through repentance and faith in Christ. Pastor Isaac then explained how the Holy Spirit works in people who have peace with God, allowing them to have peace in their hearts and peace with other people. The application for believers was to cooperate with the Spirit and

to bear the fruit of peace. Pastor Isaac emphasized the concept of replacement. Believers should replace negative feelings, such as bitterness and resentment, with repentance. They should replace negative words with blessing and negative actions with doing good toward other people. Thus, the sermon contained an initial application for unbelievers, inviting them to faith in Christ, and then focused on applications for individual believers, involving both attitudes and actions.

Pastor Jalen. Pastor Jalen's sermon was based on Hosea 10:12, God's command to "sow righteousness, reap faithful love, and break up fallow ground." The main application was directed towards believers in Christ who are tempted to remain complacent about sin. Pastor Jalen called on them to identify and confess sin in their lives and to turn instead to righteous living. Examples of sins that should be confessed include lust (signaled by the use of pornography) and a lack of trust in God concerning the future (signaled by inordinate anxiety). Pastor Jalen encouraged the listeners to pursue the advancement of God's kingdom through prayer and through realigning their ambitions.

Pastor Kyle. The theme of this sermon, in a series on church life based on Acts 2:42-47, was that the church should be "devoted to fellowship." Pastor Kyle led his listeners to ask themselves, "What area of fellowship do I need to grow in?" Examples of such areas include lending, giving, spending time, not using abusive language, work projects, deeper friendships, and taking risks to show up for someone in need. Thus, the sermon application was directed toward individual believers but concerned life in the church body, and it was a call to change their actions.

Pastor Luke. Pastor Luke's sermon was an exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16, and the applications, directed toward believers in the congregation, focused on their attitudes and

actions toward each other in the context of the church fellowship. Pastor Luke explained the meaning of Paul's key commands and called on the listeners to change their attitudes toward each other. They should be humble by putting others' needs and preferences ahead of their own, be gentle by handling conflict in a way that shows they care for the other person, and be patient by staying committed to relationships with others in the church even when their imperfections are revealed. Next, after explaining how Christ gives spiritual gifts to believers, Pastor Luke challenged the listeners to see themselves, rather than only the paid pastors, as ministers in the church. He called on listeners to identify and use their spiritual gifts. He asked listeners to write down the way that they are equipped to serve others, to take a spiritual gift assessment provided by the church, and to meet with one of the pastors to discuss it. Pastor Luke also identified an application for himself: he should seek to equip the church members for ministry.

Pastor Matthew. The sermon was based on Psalm 139, David's psalm about how God knows him and is near to him. Pastor Matthew explained the ideas in the psalm and directed application to his listeners, especially believers in the congregation, whom he addressed directly as "you" throughout the sermon. The listeners should understand and believe that "God sees what's in your life," including your sins, "God is pursuing you," and "God is thinking about you." Like David, the listeners should respond by changing their attitudes and emotions so they feel gratitude, humility, joy, confidence in God, and jealousy for God (that is, righteous indignation over evil). Pastor Matthew concluded with an application of verses 23-24, in which David asks God to search his heart for sin. The ushers passed out papers on which listeners could write down prayers of confession, and Pastor

Matthew invited them to bring the papers to the front of the church and lay them on the altar.

Pastor Noah. Pastor Noah based the sermon on Luke 17:1-10, which includes Jesus' instruction to his disciples to rebuke a brother who sins against them and, if he repents, forgive him. Pastor Noah related the passage to the recent discovery of sexual abuse of children by pastors within his church's denomination. He also applied the passage more broadly to situations where someone sins against another person within the church. The person sinned against should rebuke the one who sinned. The one rebuked should repent. If the person repents, the person sinned against should forgive.

Pastor Omar. The sermon was based on Matthew 18:10-35, which contains Jesus' parable of the lost sheep, instruction about restoring a brother, and the parable of the unforgiving servant. Pastor Omar pointed out that the middle section, often understood as instructions for church discipline, occurs in the context of Jesus' teaching about reconciliation and forgiveness. Although discipline is sometimes inevitable, our goal in dealing with someone who hurt us should not be to punish but to reconcile and restore. Pastor Omar called on the listeners to appreciate the way that God has forgiven them, and then to let go of grudges, offering forgiveness to others.

Pastor Paul. The sermon was based on Malachi 4:4-6. Pastor Paul showed how, in the history of God's salvation, Moses and Elijah were forerunners to the Messiah. Most of the sermon contained teaching about biblical theology, with the implicit application that the listeners should understand, believe, and appreciate God's plan of salvation. The explicit application came at the end of the sermon, when Pastor Paul encouraged the listeners to look ahead for the coming of forerunners, like Moses and Elijah, to Jesus'

second coming. Furthermore, like Malachi, whose name means "my messenger," the listeners should testify about Jesus to those around them.

Pastor Quentin. The sermon was based on John 17:20-26, part of Jesus' high priestly prayer. Pastor's Quentin's main application was that listeners should strive for unity in the local church. They should understand that the unity Jesus prayed for, which reflects the unity within the Trinity, needs to be lived out, not only in the church in general, but in this local congregation. Pastor Quentin taught that the church needs to be united in Christ, in truth, in love, and in purpose, and he made applications of each point. An application for unbelievers is that they need to be united to Christ by faith. Union with Christ serves as the basis for unity in the local church. An application for believers is that they need to make sure that "truth," that is, the essential doctrines of the Christian faith, serves as the basis for local church unity rather than some other source of affinity. Furthermore, the listeners should have an attitude of love toward one another, and they need to make sure that all their local church activities fit within the purposes of either worship or kingdom advancement.

Pastor Rafael. Pastor Rafael's sermon was a topical message about gossip, based on many Scripture texts, including several Proverbs and several New Testament passages about the use of words. At the outset, Pastor Rafael stated that this message was a response to an immediate problem within the local church: people within the church and people who had left the church were engaging in gossip. The two main applications were that the listeners should not spread gossip and that they should not listen to gossip. Pastor Rafael role-played hypothetical conversations between church members, showing how the listeners should and should not speak to each other. He also asked a specific person in the

congregation to stand up, demonstrating that she had not left the church, in spite of rumors that she had.

Summary Analysis of the Sermon Applications

The last section summarized the applications in each sermon. This section presents an analysis of the eighteen sermons as a group.

Sermon structure. All eighteen sermons contained application. Some of the sermons contained mostly explanation of Scripture and concluded with an application for the listeners. Other sermons were mostly application. Others sermons had a structure which alternated between explanation and application. The place of application within the structure of the sermons, according to my analysis, is shown in the following table:

Table 3: Sermon Applications within the Sermon Structure

Application mostly at end of sermon	Sermon structure alternates between explanation and application	Most of sermon is application
5 sermons	8 sermons	5 sermons

Target audience. In analyzing each sermon, I observed whether the applications were directed toward believers in Christ or unbelievers. In most of the sermons, the application was directed toward believers in Christ. Some sermons contained separate applications directed toward believers and unbelievers, while one sermon focused on unbelievers only. In addition to the data shown on the following table, Pastor Luke's sermon contained an application specifically for the preacher. The primary audience for the main application of the sermons is shown in the following table:

Table 4: Target Audience of Sermon Applications

Application directed toward believers	Application directed toward unbelievers	Separate applications for believers and unbelievers
12 sermons	1 sermon	5 sermons

In addition to analyzing whether the sermon applications were directed toward believers or unbelievers, I observed whether the applications were directed toward individual listeners (such that the listeners focus on "what I should do") or toward groups of listeners ("what we should do" as a church or some other group). According to my analysis, all the sermons contained applications directed toward individual listeners, focusing on how the individual could change. However, in seven of the sermons (those by Daniel, Kyle, Luke, Noah, Omar, Quentin, and Rafael) the applications focused on the local church setting or on changes that involved the individual listeners' relationships with others in the local church. Daniel and Quentin crafted applications related to their local churches' mission and vision.

Type of change. As described in Chapters 2 and 3, preachers craft sermon applications in order to lead to change in the listeners' lives. Some applications are focused on changes in beliefs, others on changes in attitudes and emotions, and others on changes in actions. These different categories of change are often related to each other. (For example, a person who begins to believe that God forgives him might experience feelings of guilt less frequently, and he might write a letter offering forgiveness to another person. A sermon application about God's forgiveness might focus on one or more of these categories.) For the eighteen sermons, I analyzed whether the main applications fell into one or more of those categories. As the following table shows, there was wide variety

among the sermons, with ten sermons focusing on one type of change, and eight sermons focusing on multiple types of change.

Table 5: Type of Change as Focus of Sermon Applications

Belief	Attitudes/Emotions	Actions
4 sermons	4 sermons	2 sermons

Belief + Attitudes/Emotions	Attitudes/Emotions + Actions	Belief + Actions	Belief + Attitudes/Emotions + Actions
2 sermons	4 sermons	1 sermon	1 sermons

Sphere of Life. Most of the sermon applications focused on the listeners' spiritual life (beliefs about God, confession of sin, prayer life, etc.) or on personal relationships within the local church. Two sermon applications related to Christian mission and evangelism. Other spheres mentioned in the sermons include marriage and family life, romantic relationships, work life, and media consumption. The sermons contained little mention of other spheres of life, such as civic life, recreation (apart from media consumption), or artistic or scientific pursuits.

Bridging Scripture Texts to Applications

In the interviews, I asked the pastors how they develop their sermon applications. A key question is how the pastors connect the applications to the Scripture texts. Chapter 3 described several ways to link Scripture text and application that are mentioned in literature about homiletics by evangelical writers, including the author's purpose, principles, and theological context. This section will summarize how the pastors perceived the connection between the applications and the Scripture texts in their own sermons that became the subject of this research. In addition, this section will highlight some of the

pastors' comments about how they approach the development of sermon application in general.

Principles. Four of the pastors described their sermon applications as an application of a general principle derived from the Scripture text. Pastor Garrett's sermon applied the principle in Galatians 3 that salvation is based not on law but promise: the listeners should understand the principle and be encouraged by it. Pastor Garrett said that his general process is to first determine the Holy Spirit's meaning for the original hearers, then from that meaning to derive a timeless principle, and then to ask how this principle should affect how his listeners live now. He said that he also asks, "How does God glorify himself in this text?"

Pastor Isaac said that he typically preaches topical sermons based on "theological concepts," which have many possible applications. These concepts are often related to systematic theology, such as in his sermon about how peace with God leads to inner peace and peace with others. Pastor Jalen likewise described his approach as finding in the Scripture a "precept to apply." In preparing the sermon on Malachi 10:12, he asked himself, "In what ways do my listeners need to break up the spiritual 'crusty ground' of their hearts?"

In developing his sermon based on Acts 2:42-47, Pastor Kyle traced the theme of fellowship in the New Testament, using concordance software, looking for concepts he could apply in specific ways for his church. He said that his sermons are often topical sermons within an exposition of the text. To prepare his sermons, he fills out a template he developed that concludes with the category "Next Steps." He said that while it is important

to do accurate exegesis, he spends more time in the sermon on application than on explanation. Otherwise, the listeners might think, "This applies to someone else."

Examples to follow. Four of the pastors described their sermon applications as showing the listeners how to follow the example of a biblical character. (Following examples could be described as a subset of the category of principles. The biblical character obeys an ideal or command of God that should be obeyed today, although possibly in a different way.) Pastor Andrew's sermon, based on John 1:43-51, encouraged the listeners to follow the example of Philip in evangelism by pointing others to Jesus. Since Philip's conversion exemplifies the principle that salvation is God's work, Pastor Andrew encouraged his listeners to pray for the lost. Pastor Andrew said that in his sermon preparation he asks what the Scripture text reveals about God, Christ, and people, and he makes applications based on the answers.

In his sermon, Pastor Ben interpreted Luke 7:19-23 as Jesus leading John the Baptist to doubt his doubts, a principle that the listeners should also follow today. Pastor Carlos encouraged his listeners to follow the example of Abraham in Hebrews 11:17-20 by surrendering their "Isaacs"—things that hinder their obedience to God. He said that in his sermon preparation, he first takes a "satellite view" of the Scripture in its context, then gradually narrowing his focus to a "microscopic view" of its parts. He thus seeks to assure that his sermon applications do not violate the Scripture's original meaning.

Pastor Matthew called on the listeners to follow the example of David in Psalm 139. The listeners should believe what David believed—that God sees them and cares about them. They should feel what David felt—gratitude, humility, joy, confidence, and jealousy for God. Like David, they should confess their sin to God. Pastor Matthew created an

opportunity for such confession by providing cards on which listeners could write prayers of confession before bringing them to the altar. Pastor Matthew said that his approach to sermon application is based on his conviction that God is speaking now through his Word. He asks himself, "Why is the Holy Spirit giving me this Word for this time for these people?" After considering the theological context of the Scripture and principles derived from it, he seeks to "give the listeners something to take home—something specific to do, act on, or apply."

Commands to obey. Four of the pastors described their sermon applications as leading their listeners to obey God's direct commands in the Scripture. (This category could also be viewed as a subset of the category of principles, in that Christians today might obey the principles behind the commands in different ways than the Bible's original hearers did.) Pastor Rafael, in his sermon about gossip, referred to several scriptural admonitions not to gossip or listen to gossip. Most of the sermon depicted how the listeners could obey these commands in their interactions with others in the local church.

In his sermon on Ephesians 4:1-3, Pastor Daniel took the direct commands to the Ephesians church—to be humble, gentle, patient, bear with one another, and make every effort to preserve unity—and applied them to his church, making suggestions about specific ways the listeners could obey the commands, both in their attitudes and actions toward other church members. He said that as he studies a book of the Bible, he looks for its main theme or "melodic line," and he then looks for how specific sections have a "harmonic line" which complement it. He thus seeks to develop applications that are specific to the passage at hand and also fit within the overall purpose of the book. Pastor

Daniel also said he views the Scripture passage through the lens of biblical theology as he crafts applications.

Similarly, Pastor Luke applied the direct commands of Ephesians 4:1-16 to his church, making suggestions for specific ways to obey, including taking a spiritual gift assessment that the church would provide. Pastor Luke said, "General application is easy. The hard part is how to apply it specifically." He said that he uses different bridges from the Scripture to application, depending on the genre of the passage. For Old Testament narratives, he employs the Christ-centered methodology taught by Chapell and Keller.

In his sermon based on Luke 17:1-10, Pastor Noah applied to his listeners the direct commands of Jesus to his disciples: "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents forgive him" (v. 3). Pastor Noah also included the application that a person who is rebuked should repent. As an example of a scenario into which these commands would apply, Pastor Noah referred to the abuse of children by clergy in his denomination. As far as making application for his listeners, however, who to his knowledge have not been affected directly by such abuse, Pastor Noah spoke in general terms rather than depicting how these commands would apply specifically to the scenario of abuse. Pastor Noah stated that in his sermon preparation he follows his intuition about how a Scripture passage applies to his listeners rather than following a certain model.

Theological context. Another bridge from Scripture text to sermon application is to show the place of that Scripture passage's teaching within a theological framework—whether one of systematic theology or biblical theology. The preacher can orient the listeners to their own position within the theological system and show how the teaching of the Scripture applies to them. Pastor Ethan, for example, said that in his sermon on Romans

6:1-4, he wanted to exegete its theological themes rather than every word of the Scripture text. He explained several implications of the doctrine of union with Christ, using other New Testament texts to shed light on the themes of Romans 6. For unbelievers, the implication is that they should trust in Christ and receive the benefits of union with him. For believers, the implications include the confidence the listeners should feel to face temptations, struggles, and the future, including death. Pastor Kyle likewise took a theme from Acts 2:42-47, that of fellowship, and showed how that theme appeared throughout the New Testament. Based on this wider context, he made suggestions for how the listeners should relate to others in their local church.

Pastor Hudson said that different bridges from text to application are appropriate on different occasions. The pastor should use the right tool for the moment, as a surgeon uses different tools in surgery. Underlying all Pastor Hudson's teaching are his strong convictions in Reformed systematic theology. He said that sermons should not just have a remote application but an immediate application, something for the listeners to do right away. His sermon on Luke 16:19-31 fleshed out an implication of its doctrinal teaching about heaven and hell, that unbelievers should trust in Christ for salvation.

Pastor Forrest said that he spends most of his time in his sermons on interpretation rather than application, and he explains the theological context of scriptural themes. He pointed out that his approach is intentional, because behavior flows from attitudes and convictions. This approach was evident in the sermon on John 3:1-21, in which Pastor Forrest stressed the listeners' understanding of the meaning of "new birth" as a basis for their faith. When it comes to application, he said he makes suggestions and shows examples of how listeners should live in light of the biblical teaching.

Pastor Paul traced themes of biblical theology in his sermon on Malachi 4:4-6, looking backward and forward in Scripture to show "mountain peaks" in God's plan of salvation. While the listeners may be in a valley now, they can look ahead to a mountain peak in their journey, the coming of Moses and Elijah. Malachi's description of these witnesses hearkens back to Israel's history and forward to the prophecies of Revelation. Furthermore, the listeners should be witnesses to Jesus, even as Malachi's name means "my witness."

Purpose. Finally, another way to bridge Scripture text and application is to uncover the author's purpose for including the passage and to develop an application consistent with that purpose. Pastor Omar took this approach in his sermon based on Matthew 18:10-35. He placed Jesus' teaching about church discipline in its wider context, God's heart for the lost and his desire for people to forgive others like he forgives us. Thus, Jesus' purpose in teaching about church discipline is to encourage reconciliation. The sermon applications—to appreciate God's forgiveness, to let go of grudges, and to forgive others—were consistent with this purpose.

Pastor Quentin also used the bridge of purpose. He showed that Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17:20-26 was recorded as a way to encourage unity in the church, and thus the sermon applications had to do with pursuing unity.

Varying approaches. The preceding summary has shown that the pastors employed varying approaches to bridge the Scripture texts to sermon applications. Most of the pastors employed a certain methodology intentionally, even if they would not have described the methodology in the same terms that the writers reviewed in Chapter 3 used. The pastors chose a certain approach based on the nature of the Scripture text (especially

the genre), the way the sermon series was constructed, or the pastor's own style and preferences. Interestingly, given that genre has a great effect on the pastors' approach to application, it should be noted that fourteen of the sermons were based on New Testament texts (seven from the gospels, one from Acts, five from epistles, and one from multiple texts), while only three of the sermons were based on Old Testament texts. One topical sermon was based on texts from both the Old and New Testaments.

Accounting for the Culture and Needs of Listeners

In sermon application, the preacher takes a concept from Scripture, written in ancient times and far away, and brings it into the lives of the listeners, who inhabit a very different world. I asked the pastors who participated in this study how they, as they develop sermon applications, account for their listeners' cultures and needs. I sought to discover the pastors' perception of the culture of small towns in eastern Connecticut, and how this perception affects the content and style of their sermons. Likewise, I sought to discover how the pastors account for their listeners' particular needs—spiritual, physical, mental, emotional, social, economic, etc. Such needs often relate to culture but are not only cultural.

In the interviews, the pastors shared how they assess their listeners' culture and needs and how this assessment affects their sermon applications. Their answers are summarized below.

Pastoral sensitivity. All the pastors related that they assess their listeners' culture and needs by spending time with them and listening to them. Pastor Ben said that he addressed doubt in his sermon because he listens to people in his congregation and knows

that they struggle with doubt. Some pastors listen to their church members in the church's small group ministries. For example, Pastor Garrett attends a Sunday school class that he does not teach so that he can be more attuned to listening to the members' needs and how they interact with one another. Pastor Hudson said he is aware of what is on the people's minds because he attends ten different small group Bible studies every week. The pastors also listen to the church members in conversations and by observing their social media. Pastor Jalen said that since he has been with his church for several years, his consideration of the people's needs is "subconscious." Pastor Paul likewise stated that his sermon applications are "contextualized because I've been talking with the same people for years." Similarly Pastor Carlos stated that over time he has acclimated to the local culture and has become like a person from his small town, even though he was born and raised in a large city. Pastor Ethan and Pastor Noah mentioned that they also spend time with community members who do not attend their churches so that they can understand and connect with the broader culture. All the pastors would agree with Pastor Omar's observation: "Our applications become more powerful as we know the people."

Intentionality in assessing needs and culture. The pastors would all agree that because they are so involved in the church members' lives, their culture and needs become part of the subconscious background of their thought as they prepare their sermons. There was variety, however, in how the pastors intentionally assessed their listeners' culture and needs. One pastor, Pastor Carlos, said that he tries to bracket off consideration of the particular needs of his listeners. Instead he focuses on humanity's universal need for Christ. "If I'm trying to figure out what someone's needs are," he said, "then I'm trying to be the Holy Spirit." Similarly, he does not focus on culture while he prepares his sermons, because

"the Bible cuts through culture." He said, "I would preach the same application if I were in Africa with a translator." Similarly, Pastor Hudson cautioned against focusing on listeners' felt needs to the neglect of unfelt spiritual needs: "We don't mold ourselves to what this particular church wants."

Other pastors do intentionally assess the listeners' needs as part of their sermon preparation. Pastor Daniel stated, "You're not done until you've thought through their needs." Pastor Ethan said that in his study he imagines different church members in their pews. Several pastors flip through the church picture directory, imagining how the sermon theme intersects with the details of the members' lives. Depending on the theme of the sermon, pastors might consider the needs of individuals or of the church as a community.

Certain pastors incorporate cultural analysis into their sermon preparation. Pastor Ethan enters his sermon theme into the Google search engine to learn how the broader culture is discussing it. Pastor Matthew said that he always considers his listeners' cultural context and their needs. In his sermon he mentioned many features of the culture (such as regional foods and decadence in the media), and the sermon applications targeted specific temptations to sin faced by members of his congregation. Pastor Kyle said that for his sermon on fellowship he considered the state of the culture after the COVID-19 pandemic, including the effects of separation due to social distancing and political division. Pastor Daniel cautioned that while considering culture is important for crafting sermon application, pastors should not elevate cultural analysis so much that they neglect focusing on the Scripture text.

Pastor Noah considers the effects of broad cultural changes, such as the shifts from pre-modern to modern to postmodern culture. While preparing his sermons, he asks

himself, “How has modern thinking infiltrated people’s minds? What do we need to accept or reject about that in order to follow Jesus?” Pastor Forrest said that he thinks more about the broader American culture than the local culture of New England, since local culture is less important to people than it used to be. On the other hand, several pastors discussed assessing the culture of their local churches. Some pastors intentionally craft sermon applications in order to reshape the values of their church. Examples include Pastor Omar’s call to value reconciliation when conducting church discipline and Pastor Andrew’s call for the church to rely on God through prayer while sharing the gospel with their neighbors.

The culture of New England’s small towns. I asked the pastors, “What are a couple of aspects of the culture of your town that would be helpful for a beginning pastor to know about?” As the following summary of their answers shows, the pastors generally agreed in their analysis of small town New England culture.

Pastor Jalen succinctly described what he called “the two-edged sword of Yankee-ism.” Framed negatively, there is in New England a resistance to change. Framed positively, New Englanders value tradition. Almost all of the pastors mentioned a reluctance or slowness to change in these small towns, and they said that pastors here should settle into long-term ministry. On Pastor Kyle’s first Sunday at his church, a member told him, “Don’t try to change anything, and we’ll be fine!” The pastors observed that it takes time—five years, according to one—for a new pastor to gain the congregation’s trust. Pastor Noah observed, “People don’t give a flip about what you say until they know you care.” A new pastor should learn about and express appreciation for the history of the community and of the church. Pastor Daniel said he would encourage a pastor new to this area to “be patient”

and “take the long road.” Pastor Jalen likewise said that a pastor here “needs to do slow ministry for the long haul.”

Another point of agreement among the pastors was their perception of the spiritual climate in eastern Connecticut. There is not the cultural Christianity here that is prevalent in some other regions of the country. As such, the contrast between the church and those outside the church is more distinct. In general, church members possess a real and profound faith. Pastor Ethan said, however, that in his town there is little spiritual interest outside of his church, and even within the church, people are spiritually distracted. Several pastors observed that many people in eastern Connecticut have a connection to Catholicism through their families, but most people have not received much biblical teaching. A pastor new to this area should focus therefore on a methodical and careful ministry of preaching and teaching.

Several pastors made other observations about the local culture. According to Pastor Quentin, New England culture does not appear “as open and welcoming on the surface” as compared with the culture of the southern United States, and so it is “harder to do community.” Pastor Paul described New England as having a “serious culture,” unlike American culture more broadly. Pastor Luke observed that the two most controversial topics in his community are sexuality and politics, so pastors should address these topics with sensitivity and clarity. Pastor Daniel mentioned how the economy of his town is changing. The older generation tends to work in blue-collar professions or agriculture, while young people are in white-collar or technology related fields. Pastor Andrew tries to challenge the New England value of privacy. He wants his church members to take a stand for God’s truth, rather than allowing everyone to have their own “truth.”

Tailoring communication. I asked the pastors how the culture of this region factors into what they say in their sermons. In response, several pastors described examples of tailoring their communication style. Pastor Forrest said, "The more you talk to people, the more you have a sense of how to talk." Many people in his church have served in the military, and he connects with them by using military terminology in his preaching. Pastor Matthew moved to New England from another region of the country. He started dressing more casually, like his church members do, in order not to distract them from his message. He chooses relevant illustrations, different from those he used in the past. Rather than saying, "When you leave your office for lunch and go out to the food truck," he might say, "When you are outside chopping wood." Pastor Omar likewise said that he avoids illustrations from his childhood in another state, but instead uses illustrations from his listeners' experience. Because people in his community tend to be bored, Pastor Luke looks for ways to spark their curiosity in his sermons.

Some of the pastors mentioned how they avoid unnecessarily offending their listeners. For example, Pastor Ben is careful not to attack Catholicism directly but rather uses the Scripture to clarify doctrinal misunderstandings. Pastor Kyle avoids using language, such as obscure terminology or critical attacks on people's views or lifestyle, which would offend unbelievers before they have had a chance to consider the claims of the gospel. Pastor Quentin stressed the need both to affirm what is true and challenge what is false in the listeners' assumptions.

Finally, several pastors emphasized the need in this culture for simple, clear, and direct communication. Pastor Garrett counseled pastors new to the area, "Recognize and value that these are salt of the earth people, pursuing a relationship with God, who want to

be taught." Pastor Hudson likewise observed, "These are very simple people. I need to address the needs of the soul." Speaking for his fellow pastors in eastern Connecticut, Pastor Quentin said, "This is a culture of straight shooters. We need to be straight shooters."

Areas for Future Research

This project raises the question as to whether pastors could benefit from training in methods for sermon application. A future research project might design a program for training preachers and evaluate the program's effectiveness. Specifically, a program informed by this research project might seek to train pastors in rural eastern Connecticut in best practices for sermon application.

Another possibility for future research would be to focus on how a group of pastors, such as those pastors in a specific geographical region, understand the culture of their area and their perception of how the church should relate to the culture. A researcher might design a survey instrument or some other tool to assess the group of pastors' view of the culture. Related to this, a researcher could design a program for training a group of pastors in cultural intelligence and then evaluate its effectiveness.

In addition, this study could serve as a model for others who wish to study sermon application in other cultural contexts. Researchers could adapt the methodology of this thesis-project in order to study sermon application in other geographical or cultural settings.

Evaluation and Proposals

The preceding sections have detailed the results of this research project, describing the current practice of sermon application by pastors in the small towns of eastern Connecticut. In the following sections, I will briefly evaluate the state of the practice and offer some proposals intended to help preachers here in this ministry.

The content of sermon applications. I was encouraged to find all of the pastors eager not simply to explain the Scriptures in their sermons but also to apply them. The sermons demonstrated wide variety in the sense that some applications sought to shape beliefs (the head), some attitudes and emotions (the heart), and some actions (the hands). Although certain Scripture texts lend themselves to certain types of applications, and preachers tend to have their own preferences in this regard, in my view, preachers do well to include all three types of applications, if not in every sermon, then over the course of their preaching ministry. This variety was a strength of Pastor Matthew's sermon. He encouraged the church to follow David's example in their beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Some of the other sermons focused mainly on applications for the mind or heart, and they could have been strengthened, in my view, by proposing actions that flow from such internal changes.

The research demonstrated less variety, however, in the spheres of life targeted by the sermon applications. Most of the applications targeted the individual believer's devotional life of faith toward God or believers' personal relationships with others in the local church. Many Scripture texts, of course, lend themselves toward these types of applications. However, churches would benefit from hearing applications that touch on

other spheres of life, such as professional life, family life, civic life, and creative endeavors. Preachers can intentionally look for ways to apply the Scripture to various spheres of life.

Specificity. The sermons included applications stated in general terms and in specific terms. Often, the most powerful sermon applications were those stated most specifically. Preachers can seek to communicate applications through illustrations, examples, descriptions of scenarios, detailed explanations, or direct proposals for "next steps." In my view, the very specific and immediate calls to action by Pastor Luke (to take a spiritual gift assessment) and Pastor Matthew (to write down prayers of confession) were appropriate and made their sermons clear and strong. Pastor Ethan's sermon provides another excellent example of specific application. He illustrated biblical concepts in ways that touched the listeners' emotions. (For example, God uses the various trials in our lives to shape us like a craftsman uses various tools to shape wood or metal into a masterpiece.) Pastor Ethan also portrayed scenarios in vivid terms as examples of areas of life into which the truth of the Scripture text applied. As a whole, however, although the sermons contained many applications, in my view they would have been strengthened with greater specificity.

In general, it appears that pastors develop specific applications most easily when preaching from texts having to do with church life, such as in the sermons about church relationships and spiritual gifts based on Ephesians, the topical message about gossip, and the sermon about fellowship. It is more difficult to develop specific applications from texts concerning other topics. It is possible, however. Pastor Jalen, using a text in Hosea, developed specific applications for people facing contemporary pressures, having to do with the confession of specific sins and the reordering of priorities.

Specificity in application presents a difficult and time-consuming challenge for a pastor preparing sermons week after week. Even so, pastors can make greater specificity a goal in sermon applications, as they seek to show listeners how the truths of Scripture intersect with the details of their lives. On the other hand, in my view, preachers should be cautious about approaching a level of specificity in the sermon that includes naming the names of listeners or making public the personal details of their lives. Identifying listeners in a sermon might embarrass them, and the preacher might appear manipulative.

Sermon structure. The sermons exhibited wide variety in structure. In some, the applications appeared at the end, some sermons alternated between explanation of the text and application, and some sermons consisted mostly of application. Preachers should feel free to structure sermons in various creative ways. Some texts require more explanation than others, and different groups of listeners respond to different forms of communication. In my view, however, churches benefit from hearing a balance of explanation and application over the long term. It is often helpful to strive for such balance even within a single sermon.

When the preacher waits to mention any application until the very end of the sermon, the listeners might fail to connect personally with the Scripture, taking the posture of outside observers. Another danger is that pastors might spend all their time explaining the Scripture without fleshing out the application, so that the listeners do not know quite how to respond. Some of the sermons in this study provided a rich theological exposition of a Scripture passage and included an interesting application right at the end with a strong tie to the text. As a listener, though, I was left wondering what the application meant in practical terms. On the other hand, if the sermon is solely application without any

explanation of the Scripture text, the listeners might take the message as the preacher's advice rather than God's Word for them. In my analysis, a few of the sermons in this study were mostly application. Nevertheless, they all adequately explained the Scripture passage. Pastor Daniel's sermon provides a good model of proportion by alternating between explanation and application sections. (His sermon provides an excellent model for sermon application in general. The applications were tied to the text, contextualized for his church, and adequately detailed.) No single sermon will be perfectly proportioned, but preachers can strive for a balance of explanation and application over the course of their preaching ministry.

Thus, in my view, preachers should seek to appropriately balance explanation with application in their sermons. Furthermore, it is helpful for the listeners when the preacher makes it clear that a particular section of the sermon is either explanation or application. At the same time, sermons are made stronger when the explanation sections anticipate or point to the applications. The exposition of Scripture can be framed in similar terms as the application to follow. Early in the sermon, the preacher can mention the contemporary problem that relates to the application to come later in the sermon. Thus, listeners relate the exposition portions of the sermon to their own lives, even before hearing the application sections. In my opinion, a feature of strong sermons is that there is a sense of forward movement toward the application throughout the sermon, starting at the beginning. In addition, sermons are more readily understood when there is only one main application or a few applications that are unified in some way rather than many applications going in different logical directions.

Bridges to application. I was encouraged to observe that all the pastors sought to link their sermon applications to the Scripture texts. Evangelical teachers of homiletics have written about different bridges from Scripture text to application, such as principles, purpose, or theological context. In the interviews, most of the pastors expressed intentionality about using one of these or a similar approach. As whole, in my view, the applications legitimately flowed from the Scripture texts. Many of the sermon applications involved following the example of a Bible character or obeying a direct command from Jesus or Paul. For example Pastor Daniel and Pastor Luke applied Paul's teaching for church relationships to their own churches. Pastor Rafael told his church to obey the direct command of Scripture to avoid gossip. Pastor Andrew encouraged his congregation to follow Philip's example of bringing friends to see Jesus.

Pastor Ben applied Jesus' answer to John the Baptist in Luke 7 to his own listeners when he called on them to "doubt their doubts," such as their worries about the future. The application in the same sermon to join a local church was based on another Scripture from Ephesians. In my view, in general, the main applications of a sermon should flow from the main Scripture text. However, if an application is based on other Scriptures, the pastor should make that connection explicit, as Pastor Ben did. Certain applications need to rest on a context broader than one Scripture passage. In my view, the sermon that raised the sensitive and complex issue of sexual abuse by clergy would have benefitted from bringing in broader biblical teaching in addition to the teaching about forgiveness. What does forgiveness look like for a victim of abuse? Likely, though, the pastor has addressed the topic in other sermons besides the one that was part of this research.

Many pastors are specially gifted communicators of God's Word. For some, their approach to sermon application is almost intuitive. While such pastors are often effective preachers, most of us could benefit from a more conscientious awareness of our hermeneutical approach. The different bridges from text to application can be seen, as one pastor described it, as different tools in the preacher's toolbox. The pastor can gain skill in using each tool, and he can learn which tool is most appropriate for preaching from various kinds of Scripture texts and for various listeners.

Interestingly, only three of the sermons were based on Old Testament texts. Could it be that preachers choose Old Testament texts less often because linking them to applications is more difficult? If pastors could gain confidence in employing the approaches to application described in Chapter 3, they might choose to preach on Old Testament texts more frequently. Sermons based on the Old Testament can and should lead to relevant applications, even though the bridge into the contemporary world is longer. It is important for the preacher to make explicit the principle that is being applied or the theological context, so that listeners understand how they should or should not imitate Old Testament characters.

In general, listeners benefit when preachers make clear in the sermon how an application is linked legitimately to the Scripture. A strong, explicit link between Scripture and sermon application gives the listeners confidence that they are responding not simply to a sermon but to God's Word. Pastor Omar's sermon, for example, did this well. He pointed out that Jesus' teaching about church discipline appears within the context of teaching about forgiveness and restoration. As such, the listeners understood how the application to let go of grudges carried the authority of the Scripture text.

Approach to culture. In the interviews, the pastors described how they learn about their listeners' culture and needs, not mainly in the study as they prepare sermons, but as they spend time with church members and others in the community. Over many weeks and even years of conversations and proximity, pastors gain an understanding of their listeners that they described as "subconscious." These small town pastors stressed the importance of committing to a place and a community for a long period of time. Local culture becomes almost one's own. Perseverant prayer gives pastors sensitivity to their congregation's spiritual needs and other types of needs.

Most of the pastors agreed that sermon application is a cross-cultural exercise, and that in addition to having "subconscious" intuition about the culture, it is helpful to intentionally consider it and how the truths of Scripture can be brought into it. Many pastors intentionally make analysis of culture—both locally and more broadly, current and through history—part of their development as preachers. In the interviews, a couple of the pastors seemed wary of going too far in focusing on culture, saying they preferred to focus on spiritual needs pertaining to everyone, regardless of culture. However, in their sermons, even these pastors affirmed certain aspects of contemporary culture and challenged others.

In my view, preachers benefit from analyzing both the Scripture text and their listeners through the lens of culture. In some ways, responding to God in faith and faithfulness looks the same for everyone across cultures. In other ways, the details of that response should vary from one culture to the next. Small town pastors are embedded within a local culture. It is helpful for pastors also to view the culture from the outside, with an awareness of its uniqueness, as they seek to bring the truths of Scripture to their listeners in specific, particular sermon applications. The pastors participating in this

research offered excellent observations of the culture of the small towns in eastern Connecticut. Their perspectives provide an excellent point of entry for pastors new to this area.

Furthermore, these pastors' ministries are helpful models of contextualization. Pastor Matthew provides a good model in the way that he has adjusted his language and sermon delivery in order to be easily understood by people here, without compromising the truth of God's Word. Although he is academically minded, he composes his sermons in conversational rather than academic language, while still presenting the message with authority. Pastor Kyle similarly uses conversational language in his sermons with the same vocabulary and accent of the people in the congregation. Many of the applications in the sermons studied here reflect the heart of pastors who have cared for people in this area over many years and who understand them well.

The work of the Holy Spirit. While this research project has focused on the preacher's work in crafting sermon applications, the communication of God's Word is first of all the work of the Holy Spirit. Pastor Carlos told me that as he prepares to enter the pulpit each week, his main focus is on being filled by the Spirit. All preachers would be wise to follow his example. We preachers strive for accurate Scripture interpretation, sensitive audience analysis, and engaging communication. Yet in all these things, we ourselves must learn to rely on the Holy Spirit, as we apply the Word to our own lives. The Spirit works in preachers' hearts to help us understand the Word, to live with holiness and integrity, to have love for God's people and the lost, and to shape our words for each moment. The Spirit is the One who draws our hearers to faith and obedience. May the Holy Spirit help us in every season to "preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2).

Conclusions

I embarked on this project with a desire to grow in the practice of sermon application and to help other pastors in this area. In seminary, I had focused not on pastoral ministry but on linguistics and Bible exegesis. When I became a pastor, I sensed my need to learn and grow as a pastor and preacher. In my sermons, I felt more confident explaining the original meaning of Scripture texts than making applications.

This project has benefitted my own preaching ministry and given me many ideas to consider for further growth in the future. Before starting the study, I was already confident that God uses his Word to transform lives. The study of the biblical and theological foundations for sermon application has given me a fuller sense of how God uses his Word in preaching. The biblical models show that God's Word encourages and corrects listeners, in their beliefs and in various areas aspects of life. I can preach with confidence if I am relying on the true, authoritative, sufficient, and necessary Word of God.

The opportunity to read the literature about sermon application has also been beneficial. It is helpful for me to identify the three main bridges, proposed by evangelical homiletics teachers, from the Scripture text into application. In sermon preparation, I now seek to conscientiously choose one of those bridges and to craft an application. In structuring the sermon, I am attempting to frame the exposition of the biblical text so that it leads to the application. Furthermore, I am trying to make explicit for the listeners how the application connects to the Scripture. While I am still learning to follow this approach, I have found that it focuses my preparation time and gives me more confidence in the pulpit. In addition, many ideas from the literature have been helpful for my preaching, such as Robinson's reminder for the sermon to have a single theme and Kim's call for cultural

intelligence. Even the tension between certain ideas is instructive. Sermons should aim for heart motivation, but listeners also need to know how to respond to God's Word in action and in practical terms. Christ-centered interpretation shows how a Scripture passage relates to the rest of the Bible, but often the best approach for a single sermon is to highlight the particular theology of the Scripture at hand.

Listening to the sermons and meeting with the local pastors felt encouraging and energizing. I am grateful for these pastors and for the chance to witness up close their faithfulness in preaching. They are handling the Scripture with care and are seeking to apply it in their sermons. Their sermon applications, overall, flow from the teaching of the Scripture text. Pastoral ministry has given the preachers a good understanding of their listeners' culture and needs. Many of us share the same struggles in preaching, especially balancing attention to preaching with all of the other demands of pastoral ministry. In some sermons, some of us struggle to make applications specific and unified. In my view, many of our sermons would be improved by devoting more space to application. Also, in my view, our congregations benefit when we make the connection between Scripture and application explicit in the sermon. As a group, we could grow in this area of practice.

Overall, though, the word I would use to describe the practice of sermon application among evangelical pastors in eastern Connecticut is *faithful*. The most important aspect of their preaching ministry is these pastors' reliance on the Bible and their strong conviction that it is the true and authoritative Word of God. Second, they love their congregations. Relative to these strengths, the struggles do not loom as problems but as areas for growth. May God continue to use these pastors, may he bring more workers to the harvest here, may he continue to draw people to faith and obedience, and may he receive the glory.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Project Title:	**Sermon Application in Small Places**
Principal Investigator:	**Nathan Tharel, Doctor of Ministry student, Preaching to Culture and Cultures track, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**

PURPOSE

This is a research study. The purpose of this research study is to learn (1) what kinds of applications are included in the sermons of evangelical pastors in the small towns of eastern Connecticut, (2) how these pastors approach developing sermon applications, and (3) the role of local culture in their development of sermon applications. To conduct this research, I will listen to recordings of sermons by local pastors and interview them about their approach to sermon application. My goal is to interview fifteen to twenty pastors of churches in this area. This research is part of my thesis-project in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. I hope to use the knowledge gained in order to help pastors, especially those beginning to serve churches in similar settings, in their preaching task. The knowledge gained may form the basis of written articles or other materials aimed to help preachers in sermon application.

The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. You may ask any questions about the study, what you will be asked to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.

I am inviting you to participate in this research study because you are the pastor of an evangelical church in a small town in eastern Connecticut and your sermons are available online.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate, your involvement will consist of an interview with me during the summer of 2022. The interview will last approximately 20-40 minutes.

The following procedures are involved in this study:

(1) You will select a sermon that you preached in May through August of 2022 that is available as an audio or video recording. Please select a sermon that you are comfortable discussing with me and which is representative of how you usually preach.

(2) I will contact you to learn how to access the sermon you selected and to schedule an in-person interview in June, July, or August of 2022.

(3) I will watch or listen to the sermon. A transcript of it will be included in my thesis-project, but your name will not be attached to the sermon.

(4) I will meet with you for an interview. The interview can take place in your office or in another quiet location. The interview will last approximately 20 to 40 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded for my own reference. In the interview, I will ask you about how you developed the applications in the selected sermon and how you approach sermon application in general. I will also ask about what you, as a preacher, consider with regard to local culture as you prepare your sermons. In my thesis-project, when summarizing and the describing the pastors' answers, I will refer to them using aliases in order to protect their confidentiality.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks to participating.

BENEFITS

There are no personal benefits for participating. However, there may be a benefit to other preachers in the future who might learn from the knowledge gained from this study.

COMPENSATION

You will not be compensated for participating in this research project. However, I will be more than happy to take you to lunch or coffee after the interview should you so desire.

CONFIDENTIALITY

I will include in my thesis-project a list of the churches and pastors who participated in the study. However, in referring to you and the other pastors in connection with your sermons and your interview answers, aliases will be used to protect your confidentiality. A transcript of your sermon will be appended to the thesis-project, but your name will not be attached to it but rather an alias, and the transcript will be redacted to remove identifying information. No transcripts of the interviews will be attached to the thesis-project, but rather the pastors' answers will be reported in a summarized manner. In the event of any report or publication from this study, your identity will likewise be kept confidential.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you agree to participate in this study, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to take part, or if you stop participating at any time, your decision will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you may otherwise be entitled. If you decide not to participate in the study or to stop participating, your sermon and interview will not be the subject of study in this project.

QUESTIONS

Questions are encouraged. If you have any questions about this research project, please contact: Nathan Tharel, 860-230-4610, nathantharel@gmail.com**.** If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the Co-Chair of the Institutional Review Board, David A. Currie, at: dcurrie@gordonconwell.edu; 978-646-4176.

Your signature indicates that this research study has been explained to you, that your questions have been answered, and that you agree to take part in this study.

Participant's Name (printed): _____

_____ _____

(Signature of Participant) (Date)

RESEARCHER STATEMENT

I have discussed the above points with the participant. It is my opinion that the participant understands the risks, benefits, and procedures involved with participation in this research study.

_____ _____

(Signature of Researcher) (Date)

APPENDIX B

SERMON TRANSCRIPTS

Come and See (John 1:43-51) by "Pastor Andrew"

Today we are back in the New Testament, the Gospel of John, written by John, one of Jesus' disciples, and we know that it is a first hand testimony that describes an amazing and true story of God himself entering our world. This morning we are going to look at two more disciples of Jesus and their testimony about Jesus. Those two are Philip and Nathanael, also called Bartholomew. And this passage describes their very first encounter with Jesus. So, if you have your Bible, please open the gospel of John, Chapter 1:43-51. [Scripture reading.]

John starts this part with the phrase, the next day. A week ago we learned because John was a first-hand witness he knows details and his timetable very well. Here we are the next day and we know that on that day another man was called by Jesus to join him to become his disciple. This man is Philip. He comes from Bethsaida the hometown of Andrew and Peter, and we know that it is a small village on the northeast tip of the Sea of Galilee. Naturally, many from this town are fishermen, since Bethsaida is a small town, they possibly know each other. So the amazing thing about the encounter of Jesus and Philip is that Philip quickly responded to his encounter with Jesus. The text says that Jesus found him and told him, "Follow me, Philip, follow me." The rest of the story is clear, Philip becomes Jesus' follower, his disciple. In fact, in the next verse, we find him telling Nathanael about Jesus.

Let's look at this phrase "follow me." This is a really significant phrase; the phrase "follow me" is used by Jesus multiple times. When Jesus uses it he doesn't mean people following him six feet behind, marching behind him; it means more than that. The phrase "follow me' is about a life, a life commitment of becoming his follower. It's not about a week, or a few year commitment. It's not a summer camp, spent with Jesus. No, it's a lifelong commitment, taken one day at a time. Commitment to Jesus means when we wake up in the morning, we wake up with the desire of entrusting another day to God; with the desire to honor God with anything the day brings our way. We wake up with a desire to please God and follow in Jesus' footsteps. It's day after day, morning by morning; it's about God and ends for God. "Follow me" means following Jesus daily anywhere and in anything. Additionally, following him has its cost. In Matthew 16:24, Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." So following Jesus means there are sacrifices and various costs in it.

There is one more important lesson about God in this short description of Jesus calling Philip to become his follower. Have you noticed that Jesus found Philip, not the other way around? Philip didn't find Jesus. No, Jesus found Philip and called him to be his follower. Well, God is the one that draws a person to himself. Ultimately it is God who draws us to him. So listen to what Jesus said in the Gospel of John 6:44. Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up on the last day." God himself brings awakening to someone's heart. God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit is the one that convinces us of our sinful nature, about our brokenness, our separation from

God and our need of the Savior who died for us and in our place. So he opens our spiritual eyes so we can see our spiritual misery and understand we need the Savior. We need Jesus. The Holy Spirit, the person of the Trinity, Jesus said, John 16:8, "and when He" (the Holy Spirit) "comes, He will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment." The Holy Spirit comes to a sinner's heart with this overwhelming message: your sin is real. You're guilty and judgment is just a matter of time. And the work of God's Spirit brings a person to faith in Jesus and to an understanding of his sinfulness and guilt and realization of spiritual bankruptcy. But then the purpose of it is forgiveness and redemption and restoration through a relationship with God. New life—it's really about new life in Jesus Christ. It's about forgiveness and salvation. It's about new life in Jesus Christ. But do you know what it means for us? It means that we, seasoned believers, Christians, followers of Jesus, we pray for those who still stay far from God. We need to pray for our spouses, children, families, co-workers, neighbors, acquaintances, leaders. God placed us in families and communities for a purpose, so we can pray for their repentance and salvation.

So Jesus found Philip; the Son of God found Philip and Philip followed Jesus. Philip responded to God's call. Now, verses 45 and 46, as a result of an encounter with Jesus, Philip didn't stay put, he was not passive. Whatever happened between verses 44 and 45, it made him keep moving. He didn't keep the news about the Messiah to himself. No, after his encounter with Jesus, Philip found Nathanael, also called Bartholomew, and shared with him the message about Jesus. And Philip said, we have found the one Moses wrote about in the law and about whom the prophets also wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph. And you know what, this is strong and sure expression. This is not some kind of, "We think we met him, we think we met the Messiah; we are not sure but we think that we met him." We have met the one that Moses wrote about. Philip expresses this message with a strong conviction, "This is the real deal and you need to listen to it. I tell you He's here already and, my gosh, we have found Him. We have found the Messiah, the Son of God." Philip has no doubt that Jesus is the one promised by the law and the prophets, which is the Old Testament books. Jesus is the fulfillment of the one foretold by the Scripture, the Messiah. It became clear to Philip, this Jesus from Nazareth, from this rinky dinky town, the son of Mary and Joseph, was the Messiah. The one that Moses and the prophets spoke about in the Jewish Scriptures. Philip was very clear as he identified Jesus. He's from Nazareth, He's the son of Joseph, He's the one.

Nathanael is not really thrilled about this kind of information. The Messiah coming from the town of Nazareth? Looks like the town in the region of Galilee didn't have the best reputation. So Nathanael makes it clear that he doesn't really buy what Philip shared with him. "The Messiah from Nazareth? What are you saying, Philip?" Nathanael probably doesn't know that Jesus was really born in Bethlehem. The Old Testament prophet Micah wrote about the town of Bethlehem. Micah 5:2: "But you, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, though you are little among the clans of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to me the one to be ruler in Israel, whose going forth are from of old, from ancient days." Jesus was born in the town of Bethlehem but later together with his parents, Mary and Joseph, he lived in Nazareth, too, but was born in the town of Bethlehem. So Jesus fulfills the prophesy of the prophet Micah about the Messiah. But Nathanael responded with an attitude of a person coming from a small town. What do you think Philip says? Do you think that he's frustrated? Angry? Ready to have a long argument with Nathanael? What do you think Philip's responses is "Hey Nathanael, let's have a decent conversation about Jesus. A long

argument." No, here is what Philip says: "Come and see." Yes, just come and see. He was wise.

Here is a quote from one of the books that William Barkley wrote: "Not very many have ever been argued into Christianity. Often our arguments do more harm than good." It is the presentation of the story of the cross that truly matters. So I don't know what you think but I have no time for arguing. I even don't like it. I don't know how you feel about arguing, but I don't like it. I don't do it. I try to avoid it. Some people approach the conversation about Jesus and his gospel with the purpose of simply arguing. But we are not called for winning arguments about Jesus. We are not called to winning quarrels about Jesus. We are called to share the gospel of Jesus and the rest belongs to God. "Hey, just come and see."

We need to be ready to explain our faith in Jesus Christ. But arguing, I'm not convinced. Sure, there is a time and place to defend our faith. We need to be ready to explain why we believe. There is also a time to say, "Come and see." Or to say, let me share with you what Jesus has done in my life. Or let me tell you where I was and where I am today. You invite somebody into your life so he or she can watch Jesus doing something in your life. Just simply come and see. We know that we cannot show people the real Jesus, but people can look at our life and hopefully they will see Jesus in our life. They will see a transformed heart and new life.

In verse 47 and following verses we Nathanael approaching Jesus. I don't know what exactly convinced Nathanael, but here he is going to meet Jesus finally. And Jesus says about Nathanael, "Here truly is an Israelite in whom there is no deceit." He is not saying he is without sin. But he's speaking about his genuine and sincere heart with no hypocrisy. Men and the religious leaders flaunt about themselves that they were good because they were the law followers. They were focused on their own deeds that supposedly made them self-righteous people that exalted themselves. Usually self-righteous people glorify their deeds and works. Self-righteous people talk about their own conduct. They put themselves in the center and not God and his saving grace. Sadly many people in Israel thought and acted like that in times of Jesus. They said, "Oh, I do this and that, so I'm good with God." But Nathanael was different from the self-righteous. Jesus said Nathanael was a true Israelite without deceit. He was honest, a genuine believer with no hypocrisy, rare in Israel. Obviously, as Jesus spoke about Nathanael's heart he touched something that was so true for Nathanael. Nathanael noticed that this Jesus from Nazareth knew something about him that was hidden to others but Jesus knew it. So Nathanael asked Jesus, "How do you know me?" And Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." You were under the fig tree; I saw you there. Jesus says I know your geographical position, your location. I'm God. I am aware of anything, what you do, what you say, what you think. I know your heart, your mind and your physical location. Nothing can be hidden from me. I know your heart. I know you. I wonder that in that moment Psalm 139 popped up in Nathanael's head. [Scripture reading.] God has total knowledge. He knows everything. God is omniscient. Nothing can be hidden from Him. God knows my heart and yours. Nothing can be hidden from Him. He can help me when I'm broken hearted. He can also show me sin with the purpose of repentance and restoration and renewal.

As Nathanael gets the news about Jesus' omniscience he realizes Jesus knows everything. He makes a profound confession about Jesus, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God.

You are the king of Israel." No more words, no more evidence is needed in that moment. Nathanael who was so skeptical and questioned Philip's news about Jesus makes this amazing statement, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel." Jesus, seeing the faith of Nathanael, tells him about even greater things Nathanael is going to witness first hand. And Jesus said to Nathanael, "You believe because I saw you under the fig tree, but you will see greater things than that." He then added, "I very truly tell you, you will see heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending on The Son of Man." The Son of Man is Jesus speaking about himself. It is one of the messianic titles. The title comes from the Old Testament book of the prophet Daniel. When Daniel introduces the Son of Man he speaks in the context of his coming dominion, his kingdom. In Daniel 3 he says, "He comes and his kingdom is coming. It is everlasting. It will never pass away and will never be destroyed." Daniel speaks about heaven, eternal God's kingdom. What about angels ascending and descending on "The Son of Man?" Obviously Jesus makes reference to Jacob and his dream in the Old Testament book of Genesis 28. Jacob has a dream; in the dream there is a ladder connecting earth and heaven. Scholars say a better translation is a staircase and God's angels are going up and down. In the dream the Lord is standing right beside Jacob. He's granting Jacob amazing promises of his presence and there are blessings. It is a real dream that comes true. All the blessings come to fruition in the real life of Jacob and in Israel later.

Jesus is standing beside Nathanael, God in flesh. Obviously it was impressive what Jesus told Nathanael about the fig tree. Knowledge of Nathanael was proof of Jesus deity. He knows everything. But greater things were coming and Nathanael was going to witness them. The angel part was already in progress in Jesus' life. Yes, all of this with angels ascending, descending. What's going on with this? God's angels were already serving Jesus. And angels spoke to Mary, and angels spoke to Joseph in a dream. The angelic host announced Jesus birth. At the end of Jesus temptation in the wilderness angels ministered to Jesus. When Jesus prayed in Gethsemane an angel was sent to strengthen him and angels are at the tomb of Jesus as Jesus went to his Father's glory. Angels announced that Jesus will return. What Jesus says to Nathanael is, "Nathanael you're going to see great things." The great things are coming and you are going to see and experience them. You will see all of these amazing signs and miracles and your faith will be deeper and stronger because you will truly know and understand that I'm the Son of God. I'm the Lord.

Dealing With Doubts (Luke 7:19-23) by "Pastor Ben"

I am going to make a statement that you can disagree with me all you want but I believe it is true. Every single person on the face of the earth from when they are born to when they die, at one point or another will have doubt in their life. Doubt whether I can do this sport, doubt whether I can do this job, doubt whether I can make this month's payments, doubt if this is the church for me. Doubt, doubt, doubt. We all have it. Nobody is immune to it so if you think you have never doubted in your life, I ask you to go ahead and search your soul and confess that sin of lying to God. Because I believe we have all doubted at some time or another. All the way down to the littlest ones. I don't like to use my family, but I will use Piper's example. She doubted she could jump off the side of this pool and Papa would catch her but within a half an hour she peeled off the life vest and the little floaty ring and just jumped right into my arms because we had trust. And see this is what we have to have in God. Trust in God and what He says, He will do.

Today we are going to look at John. John the Baptist was to the point in his life where he was taken and he was put in jail. We will go through the rest of the story in a little while. [Scripture reading.] Later on we are going to talk about 2 Corinthians 4. [Scripture reading.]

You see when we talk about doubt in our lives here it happens all over. We have already looked at discouragement. We have all been discouraged at sometime. We have all looked at defeat. All of us have faced some kind of defeat once in our life. Depression, we talked about that on Mother's Day. I thought that was important because a lot of women go through postpartum depression and it's a reality. Men, you go through it too. After the child is born in the first 6 months and no sleep. But it is true we all go through that, the difficulties in life. And today we are looking at our doubts and we could call it this, "Doubting your Doubts." Then doubting your doubts in your doubts. We could go on and on. So the question today is, have you ever struggled with doubt in your life as a Christian? That's the question to go back in the back of your mind and hold on to, because I believe that we will answer that by the time we are done today. I am not talking about doubting your salvation. I stand right here on firm ground and I tell you what the Bible says, the Bible says no one can snatch out of my hand what the Father has given me. You cannot lose your salvation. You can go away, you can turn your back and step aside but guess who's right here with you. Jesus is still there waiting for you to repent and come back. You cannot lose salvation. That is the one thing you can't do as a Christian. You can rebel, you can go out and sin everyday, because we do. You can do the things of the world, because we do. But you cannot lose that salvation. You can come back to God. The Bible tells me that.

We are not talking about doubting salvation. We are talking about here is our focus this morning is the doubt that creeps into our life and it is very dangerous. Everyone has doubts. Have you ever second-guessed yourself, even once? Then you doubted. My military buddies can tell you this, if you were ever in a submarine. I don't know if I'd want to go under the water with no way out. Or be in the middle of the dessert trying to map something out and find your way out. They give me a compass and a knife and they want me to get out of here? My biggest fear was the first time I jumped out of an airplane. The airplane is to keep me up, not to come down. We all have doubts and I doubted I could do it in the beginning. We all doubt something in our lives. That is what we do. Did I do it right? Did I do it wrong? We all ask ourselves these questions.

There are many kinds of doubts. Let me go over just a couple as we move into the meat of this subject. We doubt the future. We call it worry. We doubt other people. We call it suspicions about their motivations. We doubt ourselves and we call it an inferiority complex. We doubt what we hear on television that is supposed to be intelligent but it is not. We doubt things that happen. We call them skepticism. We doubt God at times and we call it uncertainty. Now one thing you did not hear in there—we do not doubt salvation. Never doubt salvation, my friends. That's that one thing you can always guarantee is there. People refuse to admit many times that they have a problem but they often doubt God because they misunderstand what he is saying to them. God is not going to tap me on the shoulder and say, "I want you to do this today." It's not going to be that clear. Sometimes we get this feeling we are suppose to do things but it is not clear. We doubt whether we should do it. But a lot of times it is God pushing us in that direction because this is the path that he has lined out for us. I am not a dream believer but I know I've dreamt things and years down the line it is like wow I remember that. We all have this feeling that something is going to happen for us and a lot of times it does.

So as we introduce the deadly deed of doubt today, we are going to make some points for us to remember. Two things, doubt is not the opposite of faith. Unbelief is the opposite of faith. We can doubt. Have you ever asked God why? Unbelief is different than doubt. Unbelief is you do not believe in God and if you are a child of God, you believe. You might not be as close as you want to be but you still believe and you are there. Doubt means to be uncertain or divided. You're wavering about something that you thought was true. When we doubt something, we are not saying that we don't believe it. What we are saying is we are not sure about it. I've done it with my bank account a couple times. I'm not sure if I am going to meet all my bills. We all say the same thing. I don't know where my next meal is coming from. Where am I going to get money for the shoes for my kid? I'm ready to retire. Do I have enough to sustain life or am I going to have to get another job? We have a lot of those but it is not doubt. It's a question that we ask there. Doubt left alone, if we don't deal with doubt, it will destroy you. If you say there is no such thing as doubt in your life, you are lying to yourself. The doubt will creep in because that is one of the tools that the devil uses and the devil is going to say, "If you doubt God then you are going to lose your salvation. You'll lose all hope. You will be one of my children. You can come to me." That is one of those lying webs that he spins because he uses every tool available to try to dissuade you from believing what is true. And the first part of what he says is "Follow me, you can lose your salvation. It's okay. I'll take care of you."

Remember the one I used a couple weeks ago, the one about the lady executive, that she had a choice to go to heaven or hell. Remember when she was in heaven. God says, "You got to spend time in hell first. Go down." She got down there in the elevator and opened the door and there was this beautiful country club full of rolling green hills and nobody ever missed the putt, everybody was shooting under par. Then after that was over, she went back to heaven and God says, "How did you enjoy it?" She says "Well, as much as heaven is singing praises to you all day, I think I would like to go back to hell because they have all this, my friends are there, and everybody golfing." He says, "Are you sure? You can stay here." "No, I want to go back." She goes back in the elevator and the door opens up and it was a barren wasteland. See, the devil puts things in front of your eyes to lair you to him and then when you are there, there is nothing like that. Everything is a lie. He is the author of lies. Why do you think sin came into the world? God allowed it, but through the lie that

he spun in the mind of Eve. "Surely you won't die. You'll be like God." Doubt left alone and not dealt with will destroy you.

See, we live in the assurance of salvation so we don't have to worry about losing anything. You might have a setback, like Job, every time you are down and you pick yourself back up, you get kicked back down again, something else goes on. But you know what God is good for, as much as this hurts my knees, my back, God picks you right back up again. Nothing can keep you down when you are in the power of God. Do not doubt his goodness. Stand on that. James 1 says [Scripture reading]. If you say you are a true Christian, you doubt God's goodness, you doubt his word, you doubt what he can do, you're a double minded man. You can't serve both sides. You have to stand on one or the other. I do not believe that anyone can lose salvation but there are people out there that claim to be Christians that have never made a true profession of faith and therefore when they go away, go away from the Lord, they did not lose salvation, they were never saved. That's what I believe because the Bible tells us there is going to be many people out there like that.

Ephesians 4:11-14 says [Scripture reading]. God wants you sitting here, watching on the internet, wherever. God wants you wherever you are to be a part of a Bible believing, Bible preaching, gospel standing church. Not someplace that will tell you what you want to hear but they will preach the gospel that we need to hear and if we go anywhere else we are going to be swayed by doctrine that is not Biblically sound. But if the church is not preaching God's gospel and they are preaching man's word, they are false. They are the people who are tossed to and fro. They are the ones who really don't know what it means to stand on their convictions, how to stand and defeat doubt, how to take on the seven D's of destruction and overcome them. Not in our own might, but I can do all things through him who strengthens me, God almighty. We need to stand and believe these things and when we're part of that family, my friends, we are stronger. You ever watch Discovery Channel when they show you how to weave cables that hold up bridges? They start off with one spin and wrap them, and wrap them and they wrap 15 or 20 of them and soon enough it can hold 1,000 tractor-trailers fully loaded that couldn't break it, because they're so strong. You my friends are stronger together believing what the Bible said. God wants you to be a part of that. The amount of circumstances that you will face, they are no longer in play.

So today we are going to talk about four points. First one, recognize that doubt is a reality. Everybody will go through it. And we talked about in Luke 7:19 [Scripture reading]. In his prison cell he is writing all this and he is hearing all these stories about Jesus and he wants to know, is this truly the one. Now he wasn't doubting the Savior coming. He had doubt in his mind if this was truly the one, Jesus Christ, even though we know the story that when John the Baptist was in his mother's womb and Mary came into the room, what did he do, jumped, he leapt in the mother's womb. He knew it was Jesus but we are here now, we're in modern times, we are in life. And he wants to know for sure that this is the one that was prophesied. If we were to go to Corinthians and look at what Paul says there. Second Corinthians 4: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed. We are perplexed, but not despaired, persecuted not forsaken, cast down not destroyed." This is an unsolicited comment to you. This is what I believe and what I found and I believe it is biblically true, that it's okay to make a mark in your Bible, to make notes, to highlight. This is the holy Word of God but it is yours to feast upon. So if you wanted to you could underline or highlight "perplexed" and "in despair," because they are very important when

we talk about life and we talk about doubts here. Being perplexed means to be at loss, to doubt, to move away from, to depart, to be uncertain, to be doubtful or confused. Perplexed is just that, you don't know what to do. But as a Christian you do not have to be perplexed because in anything you do you can call on the Lord. The devil wants you to be that way, he wants you to be perplexed so you don't know what is happening so that he can creep in and say, "Hey, listen, it's okay just go ahead and do that. God won't know. Go ahead." He is looking for a way to get through that crack in that armor of God and plant the seeds of deceit in your mind there. The devil, by influence in the world, tries to lead you astray and he does everything he can to do that.

The word "pierce" means to break through and that is what we are talking about. Breakthrough is military term on the offence if you will. It means to pierce, to break through defenses and move beyond the enemy lines. Pierce through. My friends, the very moment that you believe in Jesus Christ, that you confessed your sin and you asked Him to be your Savior and became an adopted child of God, you pierced through the enemy. No matter what the devil does he doesn't have a hold on you. He can't grab you by the scruff of the neck and say, "You got to do what I want now." I just stand on the words of Jesus Christ. "Get thee behind me, Satan. Leave me alone." You can call upon that power. But when you do it, believe it. The whole thing about the Bible is believing what it says. For instance 2 Corinthians 5:12, "For we do not commend ourselves against you, but give you the opportunity to boast on your behalf. That you may have the answer for those who boast in appearance and not of heart." It is simple but you say, "What did you just say, pastor?" I say be reconciled to God, not be reconciled to the world. Everything that happens is for a reason. God wants you to know that you do not have to be perplexed.

To despair is to lose all hope. Despair is to see no way out. You don't have to despair, no matter what the world brings you, like Job who lost everything including his family. He did not have to despair because God rewarded him by blessing him with riches untold, brought everything back, restored him. God does that every time that we confess our sins to Him. He restores us to him so that we are clean and we are in his presence again. God says there is no despair for you. Not for the Christian. There is no despair for you. Nothing in life that happens should drive you to that point because you have Jesus Christ. We have all have stood in the face of adversity. We all have done it in different situations but we have to look back and sometimes search for it so that we know just how strong you are in the face of God and you do not have to despair in anything.

When you face doubt you don't have to allow that doubt to bring you to the point where you lose all hope. We sing, "My hope is in you." It's not in me. It's in Him. The songs that we sing are to bring us to believe that our hope is in God. No one is immune to doubt. John the Baptist was a godly man. I'm going to tell you something later on that maybe you didn't know but hopefully it will be something new to you. John the Baptist was a great man but he was in prison. Why, because of the folly of a woman. He was getting ready to basically lose his head over his belief. But he declared the word of God. He went forth and declared that Jesus Christ, the coming Messiah, was real. He declared that you need to stand, be baptized for the one that comes before me, after me is greater. John 1:34 and the same in 1:29, "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." We realize that doubt is real.

Now comes the second part, recognize the reasons for doubt. There are a few of them. We know that unfavorable circumstances. Have you ever been in the circumstance

you weren't comfortable with? Most of us have. We don't like where we were. We want to get out of that situation. John was in prison because he confronted the corruption of King Herod, and because he did that—he stood for truth; he stood and called out his incestuous love with his brother's wife—he was thrown in jail. Because he stood, he was going to lose his life. You know the rest of the story. John was in unfamiliar circumstances here or unfavorable circumstances because in his own right he wasn't going to escape. Even if God did not take him out of that situation, God was going to use it for his benefit. John asked the question about Jesus, "Are you the one?" The Jews were looking for a Messiah that would come and conquer and overthrow all this evil on the world. They wanted a stout man, they wanted a Goliath that could stand there with the armor of God on and defy every other country, every other leader, every other lord. He could stand there and just intimidate them with his look, but that is not what was going to happen then. He was not going to overthrow the Roman government. He was not going to do any of that. What he was doing, he was preparing the way for his coming kingdom. To the Jews this was just not what they were looking for. Do you see something here? What they were look for. Unfulfilled expectations of man. That's not what I wanted. Have we ever said that? I have. It's not what I wanted. Not what I wanted to happen. God says it is not about you. It's about me, what I do. Unfulfilled ministry. John the Baptist was about ready to lose his head but he felt that his ministry was still not completed. He was the forerunner to go out and pave the way, prepare the way for the Lord. But little did he know that his ministry was fulfilled all the way up to the point of his death. His ministry would be fulfilled at that point because that's what God had determined his ministry was going to be, up to that point. Because he did that I'm going to show you something in just a little bit that Jesus said about John the Baptist. Not as a cousin, not as a brother believer, but as a man. This is the only time Jesus made this statement. But finally he was with unfriendly people. Well, we know that John was in jail and he was with unfriendly people. He was in prison. People wanted to hurt him.

The third thing we need is to recognize the result of doubt. First John 4:1-4 says [Scripture reading]. A life filled with doubt doesn't leave any room for any joy. The more we have Christ, the more joy we have, the more belief we have, the more strength we have, we have in the Lord, the less room it leaves for doubt or anything else the devil can put into you because you fill her up with the Lord. Focus on him and all things become clear. Many religions have holy sites, they have holy buildings, they have holy gatherings, they have holy communes, they have holy leaders. I don't know a song that we sing that says that we are holy. God alone is Holy. Nothing on the face of this earth should be put up as a monument to God claiming that he calls us to do this. This is the church, the people. This is just a building. We do not make it holy, we revere it because God has given it to us. We respect it. God is here with us when we come and join together. The Lord God is looking for a person who is humble before him and who takes his word serious. Why? Because his love lives within each and every one of you. Why? Because you were created for God's love. Why? You were made in the image of God and God is love of, guess what, you were made in the image of love and finally your purpose is to give love to others and receive love. This is what we do, my friends. God has made us in the image so that we could experience his love. Jesus came to the earth so that he could restore our ultimate purpose of a holy relationship with God. As Jesus walked on the earth the mission was to reveal the heart of the Father to us. He said I came to complete the law. I came to show you my Father. If you have seen me, you have seen the Father. It's love. It's all about God and what He did. When we make a

home for Jesus in our heart, he dwells with us. He doesn't say, give me a key to the lock, I'll come back later. He says I'm dwelling with you. I dwell with you, and I am with you all the time. He says I will never leave you or forsake you. As we make a home for Christ in our heart through faith and obedience, He begins to give us revelations about what to do, when to do it, where to go, how to go, what we should be doing. There are not great epiphanies where you're going to be a prophet and tell us this. He's going to give you direction in your life is what He is saying. He makes order out of confusion. He brings you to a point where He wants you to be. First John 5:13: "These things I have written unto you, that you who believe in the Son of God may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe in the name of God." Doubt will steal your assurance. It won't take it away, it will steal it so you don't believe it, but you need to steel up your britches, or as they say pull up your bootstraps. I have to stand and believe what the Word tells us here. Doubt will cause you to stay back and never get the real will of God in your life. It will cause you to be ineffective in ministry. Don't get me wrong, I'm in ministry, but every one of you is in ministry, too. You are ministers of the gospel, to take the gospel out and spread it out and share with other people. You become ineffective when you do not allow God to take up residency in you. When you just allow doubt to rule you.

Too, recognize there is a remedy for doubt. Doubt does not have to be deadly, destructive. It can be conquered. We read that in Luke 7:20-23, where Jesus, in the end, the very hour He started healing people, leprosy was gone. The blind could see, the deaf could hear, evil spirits were driven out, the lame could walk. I mean this says the very hour. It doesn't say in the next twenty-seven years, the very hour so that they could take this report back to John and strengthen his faith and belief and what was going on there. Recognize there's a remedy for doubt and what is that? Believing in the word of God, standing on it. Knowing that it is true. Let that doubt be flushed from your body, from your mind, from anything. It's important to notice that Jesus did not rebuke John here for asking that question. He didn't get sarcastic with him. Jesus met John at the point of his need. Has God ever met you, Jesus ever met you, where you were in need? Come to you, helped you through? Give you clearer vision? It's easy to ridicule somebody. Jesus could have said, "John you know that I'm the Messiah. You baptized me. Come on, what else do you want to know?" But he didn't ridicule him. He met him where he was right in that moment, just like all of us in the moment when we have a doubt or we have a question or something and we need to know something or we need an answer to something. He met him right where he was. This is why this little thing [pointing to his tongue] is the most dangerous weapon on the face of the earth. For when you say something, you cannot take it back if it is hurtful. Never can you, because those words burn, they sear into a person's soul and then they remember them for life. How do we overcome this? Start doubting your doubt, get past it. Doubt will not disappear just because we deny it. If we are honest with ourselves we've got to say, I've got some doubts. We have had some doubts and we will have some doubts through life but that's okay. We can overcome them. This is what I wanted to make clear. Jesus said this about only one person in the entire existence of the world. Jesus said this in Luke 7:28. You might want to hear this. Jesus declared, "John the Baptist could be the greatest man that has ever lived. I tell you among those born of women, there's none greater than John the Baptist." Jesus called him the greatest there was. Well, that's it right there. Help you get through your doubts. Jesus said this about a man. I am a man. He asked, "Are you really the Messiah?" Yes, it was proven to him, and he overcame his doubts.

Ask Jesus for help. Mark 9:24 says [Scripture reading]. This was the story of the father that came crying after Jesus asking him to heal his ill child. Know what it was? It is a story of faith because the father believed. Jesus healed the child and right away the child was made whole. Start with the faith that you have, to build on it. All of us have faith, no matter how little it may be or how small it may be. You all have faith, even the ones watching that don't believe in Jesus Christ, they have some type of faith or they would not be doubting God. You have some faith, so what do you do now? You start building on the little faith that you have or mediocre faith, maybe medium hot faith that you have. Or maybe faith that's just a little ember of your soul but you have faith if you've accepted Jesus Christ, build upon it by reading his Word. By following what He said is there.

I said doubt is not unbelief as uncertainty. Maybe you have weak faith but at least you have some faith. So build upon it. How do we do that? We start by, we listen to the word of God. Listen to a preacher that you trust, listen to the word, listen to the way he brings it out to you. Listen to the testimony of others around you. How many of you think you're great? I'm going to tell you now, every one of you who have accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior and have been forgiven from your sins is great in the eyes of God because you turned from the evil one. You've come into the fold and been adopted. Do you think—anyone who has been adopted child of God is greater than the ones who have not accepted God, not because you're better, but because you're not going to Hell. We're going to the place that has been prepared for us. And to those who finish well, he will say those famous words, "Well done good and faithful servant." You don't have to agree with everything that I say. I want you to search the Scriptures and find out. This is like a Sunday dinner for us. What do you do to the rest of the week to feed your soul? Do you crack [the Bible]? We have to. Do you know what's in your Bible? If I ever walked in your room and slipped a $100 bill into your Bible, would you ever find it? Probably, most of us would. The idea is not to let the dust gather here [pointing to the Bible] and not to let the dust gather here [pointing to his head]. It's to keep this close, so you fill more with God, and the doubts disappear. Not to say the doubts won't come back, because they will. But we can overcome them by listening to the Word, listening to the testimony of others, and read and believe what it says.

By Faith Abraham, By Faith Isaac (Hebrew 11:17-20) by "Pastor Carlos"

Hebrews 11:17-20: [Scripture reading]. Last week we talked about Abraham obeying God by leaving Ur of the Chaldees, the land of Abraham's father, Terah, and he went to this place called Haran. A place that he didn't know and he didn't have any relatives there. Around about 500 miles away and I know we almost kind of sneeze at 500 miles nowadays but 3,900 years ago, it was quite a challenge to be able to travel 500 miles. And so Abraham, he went to a place that God had called Him. One thing that I pointed out last week was this first act of obedience by Abraham made the other faith events in Abraham's life possible. And it eventually led to what we find in our text today. This faith act, this request, that God was telling Abraham to do. Just so you have a bit of a time frame context, Abraham was around 70 to 75 years of age when he was called initially to leave Ur and in verse 17, he is around 115 to 130, maybe up to 133 years of age. Abraham died at 175 years of age, and yes I do believe they counted years the same way we did. But just as a little side note, I give this little range of Abraham being perhaps, between 115 and 133 during the event that we just read. Some people think that his son Isaac—this son of promise, his one and only son, that he was told to sacrifice—some people think that his son Isaac was perhaps around 15 years of age, and so that would have made Abraham 115. Because we know that the Scriptures tell us that Isaac was born when Abraham was 100. And some people surmise that Isaac was 33 years of age, which would have been the exact same age that Jesus was when he was crucified on the cross. The Scriptures do not tell us how old Isaac was, so we can only surmise how old that he was. But I do want you to understand that within this narrative, Isaac was not a helpless little boy. Isaac willingly obeyed, so this is part of Isaac's faith. This is part of Isaac's obedience. Isaac willingly went with his father and actually even carried the stuff up the mountain that was going to be used for the sacrifice. And you might remember from the text in Genesis, he asked his father Abraham, "Where is the sacrifice? What are we sacrificing?" I just wanted you to have just a little bit of that context.

Abraham's faith is being commended here for what on face value seems a very strange act of obedience. Offer your son as a sacrifice to God. Your only begotten, or your one and only son, the son of promise. And so if you've heard the previous messages you might understand that a little better. We have even talked about that in our gospel foundations Sunday school class. When you read the story back in the book of Genesis, Chapter 25, it really would not make sense if we didn't have the full biblical picture of God's plan to redeem humanity through Jesus Christ. You may recall there is another Father in the Bible who offered up his one and only son. You might remember John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life." And so Abraham is commanded by God, to sacrifice his son, Isaac, the son of promise. The son that God told Abraham and Sara he would make a great nation through. It's part of the Abrahamic covenant from Genesis Chapter 12:2, "And I will make of thee a great nation, and will bless thee and make thy name great and you will be a blessing," God told Abraham. Abraham and Sara waited twenty-five years for God to give them Isaac. Now he is being told to sacrifice Isaac. I heard it said, when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees to go to a new place, I heard it said that when Abraham obeyed God with that, Abraham gave up his past. He surrendered his past to God, giving up his family and the lineage and the connection and the culture. And I heard it said that when

Abraham surrendered to sacrifice his son Isaac, that Abraham gave up his future. He gave up the son of promise. He was sacrificing his future, everything that God told him he was going to do.

And to me, I thought that resonated with me, as we talk about just surrendering to God. Right, because all of us have a will. We all have dreams and a will and we have desires. Things we want accomplished in this life. One of the things is we study faith in the Bible. I truly believe that the Holy Spirit leads us into a life of surrendering. Surrendering your dreams, surrendering your future, surrendering your past to what the will of God is. You know, sometimes even, we think of even those of you that you're not married, you're dating, or you want to get married. You know, even surrendering who your future spouse would be, surrendering that to God. You know that I am not by any means the epitome of faith, but I could say beyond a shadow of a doubt, before I married my wife, I surrendered that to God. I said, "God, I really like this girl, but I only want to marry her if this is your will. Is this your will? And I will surrender myself to whatever your will is." And you say, "How do you know if something is God's will or not?" Well number one, it's absolutely not God's will if it violates something that's in the Scripture. Right, absolutely not God's will. I'll give you a dating as an example. If you are a believer in Jesus Christ and you are dating someone that is not a believer in Jesus Christ, that's not God's will, because the Bible says not to be unequally yoked. Number one thing is, "Is this God's will?" No. And you say, "Well, I can influence. They can become a Christian." How about you don't date them, and you're up front and you say, "I'm only going to date and marry a Christian." And then maybe God can use that to influence them to come to Christ.

Abraham was asked to surrender his future when he offered. And I think that's a hard thing. I think we want to hold our future in our hands. Say, "I'm the master of my universe. I'm in control of my future." And Abraham was willing to surrender. The fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham of innumerable posterity was tied securely to the life of Isaac. Now, he was being told to end it. It's a difficult thing. It's a powerful faith. Abraham believed against all natural explanations that God would be able to accomplish his promise of descendants through Isaac, despite the seemingly contradictory command to sacrifice his life as a burnt offering. In verse 19 it displays Abraham's faith, accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead. Abraham believed, had he sacrificed his son, that God would resurrect his son Isaac. And if you go back and read the narrative in Genesis, Abraham had told the two—there were two younger men that traveled with Abraham and Isaac to the mountain to perform the sacrifice. Abraham told them, "We're going up the mountain, and we, plural, we are going to come back down to you again." And so even before Abraham even went up the mountain, he had faith that God would essentially raise up Isaac from the dead, had Isaac been killed. Within this event that we read in Hebrews, that's from Genesis chapter 22, we see the gospel of Jesus Christ being prefigured. Just as God the Father would offer his own son, Jesus, the Son of God, God incarnate, God clothed in flesh. And just as God would offer his only begotten son as a sacrifice for humanities' sin, Abraham would act out the gospel with his own son.

I want to point this out to you, in Genesis 22:10 it says, "And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son." So Abraham is getting ready to sacrifice his own son and the angel of the Lord, literally the Angel of Yahweh, called unto him out of heaven and said "Abraham, Abraham," and Abraham said, "Here am I." He said "Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him for now I know that thou

fearest God, seeing how thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me." I think it's a proper theological understanding of what's taking place in the Old Testament. In Genesis 22:11, when it's a definite article, when *the* Angel of Yahweh spoke out of heaven, that was the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. That was literally Jesus from heaven, talking to Abraham. And there's a couple clues in the text. For example, the angel of Yahweh said, "Abraham, Abraham." It's eerily similar to, in Exodus Chapter 3:4, Elohim, God, called Moses out of the burning bush and said, "Moses, Moses." So here, Yahweh, pre-incarnate Christ from Heaven says "Abraham, Abraham." And I think that's interesting that the very one, the very God that would become flesh, the very Yahweh—sometimes we miss that Jesus is God, Jesus was Yahweh in flesh and sometimes we miss that, the divinity of Jesus Christ—and so, the very one that would die on the cross for our sins, is the very one that would speak to Abraham. Verse 13: "Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns, and Abraham went and took the ram and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son." In Genesis 22:14, "And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah Jireh." Jehovah Jireh is literally translated "Yahweh will provide." "Still called this day, in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen."

If you don't know, I think there has even been a little bit of a movement of not needing the Old Testament. I gotta be honest with you, I don't agree. The New Testament doesn't make much sense to me without the Old Testament. Jesus is all throughout the Bible. The gospel of Jesus Christ is all throughout the Bible. It's not just something in the New Testament. It's depicted everywhere in the Scriptures and when you study it you see it jump out of every place. And so just to continue with this thought of Abraham's faith, in Romans 4:18-22, Abraham's faith is summed up, "Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the Father of many nations." This is talking about Abraham "according to that which was spoken, 'So shall thy seed be.' And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead when he was about a hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb. He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God. And being fully persuaded that what he had promised," what God had promised, "he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness."

That's a powerful faith depicted, we could go so many directions with that. We could talk about our own life. My mind is brought to the afterlife. My mind is brought to, when, as the song says, "When this poor lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave," whenever this physical body, this container that houses our eternal soul, when this thing stops working, because of my faith in Christ, I'm going to seize upon my eternal inheritance. That is the greatest hope. And that should keep your burdens, your trials, anxiety, all the things that you worry about in life. The fact that through faith in Christ, you are going to have eternal life someday. This should be a powerful motivator to you. And this is the same faith that Abraham had. He didn't stagger at the promises of God. He believed. And this is the same faith that we should have. We should believe. You know, I think of, oh my goodness, do we not worry about our children in this godless culture? Jesus can do it! Jesus will step in and he will work in their lives in ways that I can't. I'm going to fail as a parent, I'm going to fail as a pastor, I'm going to fail in every area of my life, to some degree. But God is faithful, and God can do it. I want you to have that same faith, and that same confidence in your life, that God can do it. He can do all things. He can do all things through us and he is the one that strengthens us. And so Abraham's faith was strong.

The brilliant Danish theologian—I love referencing multi-hundred years old dead people. It makes me sound real smart. But this is a really good quote. The brilliant Danish Theologian, of 200 years ago, Søren Kierkegaard. When I was looking him up, he died at 42 years of age, and I'm thinking, man, I'm 42, and I just think not everyone is guaranteed any longevity. But just a reminder, if you've been on earth for any length of time, just thank God for longevity. That even 150 years ago there were so many things that killed us that we don't even think twice about. By and large, we have the ability to live and overcome illness and that's a blessing from God. Every day is a blessing from God. Kierkegaard said this, and it got me thinking. "True surrender is indicated when a person is willing to give God his Isaac." And I really got thinking about that because Isaac was the son of promise. It was the fulfillment of all that God said he would do in Abraham's life. And Abraham was willing to surrender. And for us the question is, what is your Isaac? What is it in your life that you're not willing to surrender and say God, here it is. And again, I didn't think about this before hand. That's why I'm thinking it's the Holy Spirit. I think about the rich man. Remember the rich man that said to our Lord, said, "Teacher, I have kept the commandments, I have obeyed the law since I was a little child. What must I do to have eternal life?" And Jesus, knowing his heart, knowing all things, knowing that he was a very wealthy man, told him, sell all of your possessions and give them to the poor. And that man went away very sad because that was the thing he was unwilling to do. That was his Isaac, right? And you're like me. I don't have any money, so money is not my Isaac. But we all have an Isaac. We all have things in our life that we are not willing to surrender to the lordship of Christ, allowing Christ to sit on the rightful place in our heart, which is King Supreme. He wants to be Lord of your life. What is your Isaac? True surrender is indicated when a person is willing to give God his Isaac. Abraham obeyed God and risked Isaac. Abraham risked everything.

As we go through this, who is Isaac? Isaac is the only child of Abraham and Sarah. He was the son of promise. The son that said that God said that through him would come a great posterity and it would be more than the sand that's on the seashore, the one who would inherit the promises. Isaac would be the inheritor of the promises to Abraham. And those promises, they were really eternal promises. And though there was a physical heir to the promises—Abraham would have Isaac, and Isaac would have Jacob, and Jacob would have twelve sons that would become the twelve tribes of Israel, essentially. And so the tribes of Israel are Jacob's sons, minus Joseph, minus Levi, plus Joseph's two sons Ephraim and Manasseh and then the son Levi would become the one who would occupy the priesthood and they would not be given an inheritance. Those are the twelve tribes of Israel, basically Jacob's twelve sons with just a few differences. But God made from Abraham a physical nation and gave Abraham's descendants a tangible land to live in, but this was not the inheritance. This was a picture of a much greater thing that God was doing through Jesus Christ. We will inherit eternal life. And through Jesus Christ we are spiritually descended through Abraham. I think, I hope you see that through the Scriptures. Yes, there was a physical land. Yes, there was an actual people. But there was spiritual people, and you are part, if you name the name of Christ you are children of Abraham through Christ. And its like, you know we sing that song to the kids, "Father Abraham had many sons, and I am one of them and so are you." Adults don't even know what that song means, right? That's through Christ we are spiritually descended from the promises of Abraham.

Now Isaac had a half-brother named Ishmael. Ishmael was a result of the union that Abraham had with Hagar who was Sarah's servant. And not to get in the whole story, but

you could say that Ishmael could represent what happens when we doubt God's promises in our lives. Because, God was taking a whole long time to answer that promise, and Sara was barren and she was past the time where a woman should be able to have children. So they said "Well, God we're going to help you out a little bit. Here's Hagar, have a child with her." Well, they did and that child's name was Ishmael and as the years went by, Abraham kind of cast out Ishmael. But it's interesting—I think that some of you may have heard this before—it's interesting that Islam, probably the second largest religion in the world, but Islam traces its roots of how Bedouin tribes originated or nomadic peoples originated, it traces their lineage through Abraham and Abraham's son Ishmael. Ishmael also had twelve children and the Bible actually records the names of Ishmael's twelve children. It was a fulfillment of God's promise to them. In Genesis Chapter 17:20, "And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation." If you go to Chapter 25:16 of Genesis for that, it names all of Ishmael's children. But it says these are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names by their towns and by their castles, twelve princes according to their nations. And so the Koran actually records the lineage, of Ishmael's twelve children, and it's kinda how they trace their origins. But some have suggested and I tend to agree, that all the chaos in the Middle East and the fact that Muslims want to annihilate the Jewish state from the face of the earth is a consequence of Abraham and Sarah's doubting God, and doubting God's ability to do what God promised.

If I can make an application: faith or your lack of faith. You say "What is faith?" Well, you know my definition. Faith is the belief in the truthfulness of God, and reliance upon Jesus Christ for salvation. But faith, or your lack of faith, has ripple effects for untold generations. You know, sometimes we don't think our lives very significant. But I promise you the way you live your life, whether it be by faith or be by doubt, it will ripple. It is like a stone that you throw in a pond and the ripple effects. They don't stop. They go on and on and on. And this is the significance of life. Your life has such a profound significance. You are not a cosmic accident, you don't live some kind of a meaningless existence where you're just going to like fade into oblivion. Yes we will physically die, but our lives will ripple on to eternity and we need to live our lives with that perspective. The faith we have, the decisions we make, how we live, how we glorify Christ with our lives, it makes a difference for eternity. I believe that. This holy and divine book that I hold in my hand, it's filled with promises that God has for you to live a life to the glory of your Savior. Would you today and every day decide to embrace them? Claim those promises and live them, and demonstrate. Let your life by faith demonstrate that you believe God to be true. Living by faith believes God. Chapter 11 opened up, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" and then verse 6 told us in this chapter, "for without faith, it is impossible to please God. He that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."

In closing I want to pose a question to you. What is the Isaac in your life? Ask God to search your heart. Ask God to search your spirit. I can't answer that question for you. What is it that has a stronghold in your life? It's not something that is necessarily intrinsically sinful. Perhaps you have some priorities that are out of order. Perhaps you have something that you will not surrender to God. You're holding out. You say, "God, you can have everything, but you can't have this, you can't have my Isaac." What is your Isaac? Will you surrender that to your Lord in faith? Do you have strongholds? Things that are preventing

you from obeying God, from giving God your best? Are you sacrificing the eternal? Listen to this, are you sacrificing the eternal on the altar of the immediate? Your life will echo for eternity. Are you truly surrendered to Jesus? If not, why? What is your Isaac? And the first act of surrender to Christ, and I'm not speaking of salvation, but faith in Jesus Christ is the first act of surrender. Will you surrender whatever it is your trusting in to have eternal life? It could be religion. It could be that you're a good person, that there is some kind of economy that you have in your spirit—if my good generally outweighs my bad, I'm going to make it into heaven. Would you surrender all of that and would you surrender to the biblical gospel that God became flesh, that God lived a sinless and perfect life for thirty-three years and that God sacrificed himself as an offering, for your sin on the cross, that God was placed in a tomb, and that Yahweh rose again from the grave on the third day according to the Scriptures, conquering death, offering forgiveness of sins, and eternal life to all those that will trust in him? And by the way, the human way to that Yahweh, the human name to that Yahweh I mentioned was Jesus or Jeshua, as they would have said in Hebrew. And he was God. And he is the way, and he is the truth, and he is the life. No one will get to the Father, nobody will have entrance into heaven except if they go by the way of Jesus, because there is no other way that you can go. No other name given among men, no other name among heaven, whereby we must be saved, other than the name of Jesus. And it is at the name of Jesus that every head will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. I've said many times over the years, bow now or bow later, but your tongue will confess and your knee will bow that Jesus Christ is Lord. I don't know about you, but I want to bow now and I want to confess now, and I want to bow later and confess later. I want to do both because Jesus is the Lord of my life and I sure do pray that He is the Lord of your life. Are you surrendered to Jesus? If not, why?

United We Stand (Ephesians 4:1-3) by "Pastor Daniel"

United we stand or divided we fall. That is such a powerful yet true statement. United we stand or divided we fall. It seems now more than ever within our world, we hear about churches that are more divided than they are united. Isn't that true! We hear countless reports of sexual abuse. We hear countess reports of the abuse of authority within churches. We hear of countless places where people feel that they do not have a place within their church bodies and maybe even sometimes broken relationships. We hear these stories again and again, as we go through social media, as we go through websites, as we think about what it means to be Christians in today's day and age and how to live with other Christians. Here at [name of church], we believe that being part of a local church is absolutely essential to those that call themselves followers of Christ. We believe in our necessity to gather with others, to worship the Lord, to proclaim his goodness, to unite together in submission to the hope that we have in the gospel, and in the instruction that we live by, within Scripture. You know, it's such a powerful thing when the church unites together under a message to live by, compared to the division that we see within the world. Today friends, like no other day, how we live truly does matter. And you know I don't want to under-emphasize that point, because I think for all of time how Christians have been living has been important. But especially in our day and age, you and I may be feeling this truth right now, that how we live truly matters. We are ambassadors for the Lord, and the testimony that we set before the world, and before one another is going to impact how others are seeing and perceiving the truth of the gospel. We have been studying through the book of Ephesians. We have been learning the truth of the gospel as Paul has laid it out in the indicatives of Chapters 1-3 what God has done for us. We've learned some truth about Gospel belief and now as we head into Ephesians 4-6, we are going to be talking about living out the gospel together.

To summarize what we have covered so far, there are basically five truths that I want us to remember from Ephesians 1-3. The first is this, that God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing through the gospel. That's the first thing that he writes, as he addresses these Ephesian believers, that God has given us everything that we could ever hope for through the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his death, burial, and resurrection, we have been people who have been adopted into the family of God, united with Christ, redeemed and reconciled, and made alive with Him. The second truth I want us to know is that we must experience the power of the resurrected Lord in our gospel living. That's what Paul prayed for in Ephesians 1:15-23, that we would experience the power of the Lord in our gospel living. Number three, the gospel defines people as dead in their sins and trespasses. So if you're human, and you don't know God, you are dead in your sins and trespasses. But Ephesians 2 also tells us that we have been made alive through the mercy of God in Jesus, that we have been saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in the work of Christ alone, for the purposes that God has established for his people. Salvation has come. We were once dead in our sins and trespasses but we have been made alive in Christ. This is the grace and mercy of our God. The gospel also defines our community as God's people. We individually were separated from God, but we collectively also as humanity were separated into multiple spheres. But, in the gospel, we who were once aliens and separated from God have now been brought near through the peace of Christ. We have been brought in as citizens who have been reconciled despite the differences we may have had with one another, that

God has made us into a new household, a new family in the Church that represents his power and his might. And finally, the gospel reveals the mysterious workings of God and proclaims his goodness through the local church. We've learned a lot in Ephesians 1-3, but now we are going to see that Paul is going to dial up the heat, so to say, as we turn to Chapter 4.

Within Ephesians 1-3 there are only two times in which Paul calls us to some sort of action. And it's the same word that's used in both circumstances. It's in Ephesians 2 and Ephesians 3. We are called to remember our previous condition. Within Ephesian's 4-6 there are going to be 39 imperatives that Paul will use to call us to action. So we are going from defining what the gospel is, now to then calling each other to living by the gospel in Ephesian's 4-6. Christians, how we live matters. And I believe Ephesians 4:1 is really the call that is the rest of the book. Paul says this, "Therefore, I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling you have received." Brothers and sisters, our call this morning is to walk worthy of the gospel. And over the next weeks and months, as we preach through these chapters, that is the drive we are going to continue to emphasize. It is going to be our drumbeat, again, and again, and again. We must live worthy of the gospel. Living worthy of the gospel isn't just a Sunday morning routine in which we devote two hours to some sort of effort. Living worthy of the gospel is an everyday walk, inside and outside of the church's walls. It's in our actions, it's in our motives, it's in our relationships, it's in our perceptions, and it's in every single area of our lives. Living worthy of the gospel is the chief matter to which we are to devote ourselves as believers and followers of Jesus. We must be a people who not only believe the gospel and defend the truth of the gospel, we must be a people who live by the gospel. You've heard me say this before, and I'm going to say it again, orthodoxy without orthopraxy is meaningless. Simplified, we must practice what we preach.

So, brothers and sisters, my argument for us this morning, and what we are going to cover over the next two weeks, is this: we must work to maintain the unity we have in the gospel. We must work to maintain the unity we have in the gospel. In verses 1-3 we're going to see the manner in which we maintain unity, and the means by which we maintain unity. Next week as we look at verses 4-6, we are going to see the basis of our unity. This week we are covering a lot of practical application for you. How do we work to maintain unity in the gospel as followers of Jesus? There are basically two ideas that I want to point us to, or actually three ideas today. The manner in which we must work to maintain unity is with all humility, and gentleness, and patience. We must be humble, be gentle, and be patient. Be humble, be gentle, and be patient.

Let's see God's word again, Ephesians 4:2, "Therefore I the prisoner in the Lord, urge you to live worthy of the calling you have received with all humility, and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love." My first idea is this: be humble, be gentle, be patient. Notice that Paul says here, you may have, if you're reading in the ESV, it says *walk* worthy of the calling in which you have received. In the Christian Standard Bible, I think this is a helpful translation, it says we must *live*, because the word *walk* that's used here really does equal out the idea of living by our conduct. Walking is going to symbolize in Ephesians 4-6 our living and our way of being. It's important that we notice here though that this is not just a call to moralistic change. We are not just talking about behavior modification. Remember Ephesians is built upon Chapters 1-3 and so now the actions that Paul calls us to here in chapters 4-6, these behaviors or these actions are rooted in a real

life change that has come through the transformation of the gospel. We are not just calling people to change their way of living for the sake of being better people or doing different things. We are calling people to live in light of the gospel transformation we see clearly in chapters 1-3. If you're a follower of Jesus this morning, the only reason that you can change to live for God's glory is because of the gospel. It's not because of our efforts to do more or to try harder. Right? Maybe we can grow in discipline, and discipline is a wonderful thing, right? We've probably seen real fruit that has been born through our efforts to change. But the only reason that we actually see fruitful change for God is because God has changed us to begin with. We're not talking about moral behavior change, just for the sake of change. We're talking about living in light of a gospel transformation that God has already done within us. So how do we do this? What manner in which should we walk according to Ephesians 4:2? It says with *all* humility and gentleness. The emphasis of these two characteristics is within the word *all*. With *all* humility and gentleness.

Humility is the antithesis of pride. Pride destroys community. But humility is the idea of putting the needs of others above ourselves. So we are called to live with humility, to be humble. To recognize that being part of a follower, or being a follower of Jesus within the context of a local church, means that we need to put ourselves second and put others first. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul says it this way in Philippians 2, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, make my joy complete by thinking the same way, having the same love, united in the Spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. Everyone should look out not only for his own interest, but the interests of others." We walk worthy of the gospel first by being humble. So what would that look like as a Christian in [name of town] at this particular point in time? We need to adopt the mentality that church is not about me, but that church is about serving God and serving others. Right? You may have heard of this idea, or maybe somebody said, "What can the church do for me?" Let's scratch that question from our minds and adopt the mentality of how can I serve God and serve others well? So, friends, lets adopt a new mentality as we come into church Sunday to Sunday. Not what can the church give me so I can feel fulfilled in my desire, or fill my cup up or be a consumer, but rather, how can I serve God and serve others? We can humble ourselves also by placing our preferences in their proper places, by addressing things, and looking at diversity as a gift. Thinking about things, like even music—music may be one of the ways that the church has been contentious for ages. Should we do Gregorian chants? Most of you would say no. You don't want the "Ahhh," right? It's not very encouraging when you think about gathering for worship. In earlier centuries it was very encouraging. We have the battle of the contemporary worship wars right? Should we be all contemporary and sing songs like we see on K-Love or should we sing hymns only? But those are preferences that are not the right hills to die on. Diversity is a wonderful gift. That's why we sing newer songs, to the rhythm of 4/4 or and it's why we sing some hymns that are often in 3/4 or 6/8, even though they are harder to play. Music is meant to encourage us so that we sing to one another and sing to the Lord. In fact what we want to do more of is turn the volume that's on stage down and turn the volume in the congregation up so that we encourage each other as we sing our praises to God. But we can become prideful if we think that our type of worship music is better than the Christian that stands next to us. If you think about your preferences, maybe it's outside of music. Is your preference, really, quite

frankly about the integrity of the gospel or just a thing that you appreciate? Humble yourselves by recognizing where your preferences lie in light of the gospel and building others up. How can we humble ourselves within our church body? By making a goal, week to week, to encourage someone spiritually. You want to humble yourself as you come in this church, Sunday to Sunday? Make an aim to have a conversation with someone to encourage them. Maybe it's celebrating the work of Christ that you see within another person. Or maybe you've been hanging out with this person in like your small group setting, whether it's core group seminar or you've seen them at the men's or woman's breakfast, or you've seen them in a Bible study, and you're watching how they interact with other Christians. We can humble ourselves, by encouraging them and saying, "I'm seeing God work in you in this way. I'm celebrating the work of Jesus in you." You can also humble yourselves by saying, "You know what, instead of being cranky about the thing I would prefer on Sunday, I'm going to highlight something I appreciated and share it with someone else this week." We are called first to humble ourselves, so that we can maintain unity with others. Think less of yourself and place others above yourself.

Notice that it doesn't only just say humility, it doesn't only just say be humble, it also says that we should walk worthy with all gentleness. It's interesting if you look throughout the New Testament, the word gentle is actually most often used in reference to restoring someone who has either been in sin or correcting someone who is in error. But when we see sin, what we often want to do is we just want to smack that out. Its like, we'll put an end to that, we're going to shut it down, right? We should be shutting sin down. Sin does not lead to fruitfulness for us. The more we enable sin, the weaker we become in our efforts to maintain unity. It's easy also to want to correct someone when you hear them say something that is sort of not on par with the truth of Scripture. But notice that Paul's emphasis and the emphasis of the New Testament is that when we are confronting someone in sin, or correcting them in error, it's that we do it with gentleness, not out of a place in which we say I'm right and you're wrong. Friends, I'm just quite honestly convinced that in our efforts to maintain unity, sometimes we'd rather be right about something than right with someone. And sometimes that's the right hill to die on, and sometimes it's really not the right hill to die on. There's a balance that's to be had here. We want to be truthful about what the Word says. We want to be in line with what the Scripture says. But we also need to recognize that as believers walking with one another, we have this long term perspective in which we are not just here for the moment or for the next year or five years, but if these people are actually genuinely Christians, we are with them for eternity, worshiping together the risen Savior. And so sometimes, rather than just being right about our particular ideology, we need to recognize that person is blood bought and redeemed by the Savior. Don't just try to win the position, win the person. Don't just try to win the person, stay consistent with the Scripture. It's not all about being right. It's about being faithful—faithful to who God is, and what he has done. So how do we become gentle with others? I want to make two suggestions for us. One is this, that we need to learn to ask probing questions. So that when we hear something that we may think is erroneous or when we see something as a pattern that may be sinful in someone's life, we learn to ask gentle questions to really help illuminate what we are seeing. I value being direct, I don't beat around the bush often. I try to be very empathetic and sympathetic with people but you can feel pretty well confident with me that if you are going to say something you can just point it out. I may be defensive for a second, but I more often than not will listen. Some

people are very direct. I know a few of you in the church body that are direct and you appreciate that directness. And I've been on the receiving end of your directness. And I've appreciated that as well. There are other people who are just not as direct, so there is this clarity of knowing who you are talking to. So, I'll make the recommendation that you shouldn't talk to everybody in the same way in which you would talk to me. And I will try to talk to everybody else in the same way I appreciate being talked to. But we need to learn to illuminate the things that we are trying to point out. Which really kind of leads to my second clarification about being gentle is that more often than not our lack of gentleness is because we have actually avoided having a hard conversation with someone. Friends, don't be avoidant in having conversations about sin and having conversations about error. Ask questions. Give people the benefit of the doubt. Think highly of them. Think of them more than yourself. But ask questions. Don't avoid hard conversations, so when you see something, if you see somebody struggling say, "I'm noticing that you are struggling. Is everything okay? Can I pray for you? Do you want to just have somebody to talk to? Can I listen?" Being gentle with others doesn't mean avoiding it and hoping that somebody else is going to just kind of come in the stead and then solve the problem. Because guess what, if you've had the thought, three other people have probably had that thought too. Maybe somebody else will get to it. Friends, it's realizing that in the light of the gospel, our sins before God have been exposed. We are known by God. He knows every part of us. And yet in Christ He receives us. That's the truth that we see individually within the gospel. But that's also how we should live within community as believers in the gospel. The gospel doesn't avoid the small issues. It exposes them in the light and shows the redeeming power of the gospel on display. Let the gospel redeem, expose. Don't avoid the hard conversations. Have the hard conversations with gentleness. If you're thinking, "Man, I don't know if this is going to be received with gentleness," change your tone. Try to be more and more gentle, but don't avoid a hard conversation.

The third manner in which we are to walk worthy of the calling of the gospel is by doing so with our favorite word in the Bible ever, patience. Have you ever prayed for patience? How's that going? I'm not alone. You pray for patience and what does it seem like happens? Temptation! It's just thrown upon you. Patience though, friends, is a characteristic of God. It's a characteristic of God that we are to emulate. Romans 2:4 tells us that God's patience leads us to repentance. In that passage it says, "Or do you despise the riches of his kindness, restraint, and patience, not recognizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?" We're often not patient people, especially as Americans. We want everything instantly. We live in the technology age where you can click it and you can get it. I can order it on Amazon and have it tomorrow. But biblical patience is a virtue that reflects the God we worship. Friends, we need to be a patient people. We need to adopt the long road approach. Again we are with one another, not just for the next year or five years or Lord willing ten or twenty years. We are with one another as the family of God for eternity. So are you bothered by the threat of the immediate? You know that there are times when we want to like solve the situation right away. Often what we need to do is we need to stop and pray. Stop and pray. Seek the Lord in his wisdom. And friends, I do want to encourage you to think about your life here, specifically in the context of [name of church]. Don't just think about being a member for this Sunday into next Sunday. Think about being connected to this church body and the believers that are here for the next year. What's the next year going to look like together? What's the next five

years going to look like together? What's the next ten years together? How's the Lord going to grow this church? The next twenty years together? Make roots. Stay! Plug in. Rub shoulders with each other. The manner in which we walk worthy of the gospel is with humility, gentleness and patience. Friends, be humble, be patient, and be gentle.

There are two means by which we get to show our humility, gentleness and patience. The first is bearing with one another and the second is with our eagerness. So, the first is bearing with one another. Notice this in verse 2, "Bearing with one another in love." Do you know what the word bearing with one another means? It means suffering with each other—like persecution suffering. This is Paul's nice way of saying to us that we need to put up with each other. Christians belong to a family. Now you're not just part of a meeting. You're not just part of an organization. You're part of a family. If you're a follower of Jesus you are part of his family. Bearing with the members of our family isn't a meaningless nicety. It's not something we should just do, just to avoid conflict. It's a commitment that means blood, that means everything. There is a reality, friends, you're not going to get along with everybody. You're not going to have the same kind of relationships with everyone in the church that you have with those that you feel very close to. And differences in relationships doesn't mean that we are not unified. It just means that there are different degrees of relationships. We want to be in gospel community together. In fact, friends, we're not going to get along with everybody, and we will encounter people who bore us, people who annoy us, people who irritate us, people who hate us, and people who exasperate us in the family of God. Have you had siblings? Have you had parents or grandparents? Do they not at times bore you, annoy you, irritate you, or exasperate you? They do, don't they? Do you still love them? Yeah, cause they're your family. So there are going to be times in which bearing with one another is going to be really easy because we have a relationship in which it's just easy to get along with someone. There are going to be times when it's going to take more work.

Two applications for you: The first as you're thinking about bearing with one another, give a little bit more length to your bearing with that person than you think you should. Be a little bit longer in your forbearance. Dan Miller, he says this: "Bearing with other believers is an active partnership with the Holy Spirit. Notice this about the truth of the gospel, the Father never quits on his children, and the Spirit never ceases to bear with our sins and weaknesses until he has the prize he is after, our conformity to Christ." The Father never quits on his children, the Spirit never ceases to give up on our conformity to Christ. We can bear just a little bit longer with the person that may annoy us. We can give it a little bit more time. We can give it a little bit more prayer. We can give it a little bit more grace. Bear with one another. It doesn't just say bear, it says do so with love. Do you love your brothers and sisters in the Lord? Not just for the sake of saying it because you're supposed to say it. But do you really, genuinely, actually see them like Jesus sees them, redeemed, precious? Do you love them? Bear just a little bit longer friends. Maybe even with my preaching. But second, as we think about forbearance, we need to recognize that it does indeed have a shelf life. The virtue of putting up with sin can become a vice. God will render justice on rebellious sinners at the last day. God will execute justice against sin, and churches must recognize when a member has been in persistent, unrepentant sin. When someone continues to sin, and does not repent of that sin, we as the church, according to Matthew 16 and Matthew 18 and Matthew 5, we have a point in which we can say this is no longer consistent. There is a shelf life. The tool for making such a determination is not our

personal, unilateral opinions. It's church discipline, the instructions that Jesus has given us clearly. We've gone to them one to one. We've gone to them as a small group. We've brought it before the church. If there is still sin what does the Bible tell us to do? To treat them like they're unbelievers. Unrepentant sin leads to excommunication. Now the door is open for restoration, repentance. It's always open. We always want to create an avenue in which we can see restoration happen. But friends we have to see that at some point or another we must draw a line. Say this is what it means to follow Jesus; this is what it does not mean. So, bear a little bit longer, but draw the line where Scripture draws the line. And particularly recognize that in the authority that is the local church. If you think of another passage in Titus 3, where Paul instructs Titus that if there are those that are creating division, to warn then once, to warn them again, but on the third time, to have nothing to do with them. There is a shelf life to our forbearance. Be willing to forgive seventy times sevenfold, but call sin, sin, and do not bear with it in such a way that it becomes a vice.

Finally, the last mean in which we are to walk worthy of the gospel is by maintaining unity, with eagerness. Notice that in verse 3, "making every effort to keep the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace." Make every effort, brothers and sisters. That means work at it! But I want you to notice something. Notice he says *maintain*. He doesn't say create. He says maintain unity. Unity is something we receive in the gospel. Well, you may think, "Well, I think differently than that person." Are you believers in the gospel? Guess what? You're united in the gospel. So you may have diversity in some opinions, and some ideas and maybe even some theological things, but you're united in the gospel. Paul tells us that the Spirit sovereignly creates our unity through the gospel and that we are called to maintain it. So our work is not in creating unity, it's in maintaining the unity that we have. God has already done this. He has already united us. That's in fact that is what Ephesians 2 is telling us we were once what dead, now we're alive. We were once aliens, now we're citizens. We were once separated, and now made as a family. This is what the gospel does, it unites us together. When we think of making every effort, our hearts are usually kind of set on our individual tasks, is it not? What can *I* do to maintain unity? What can *I* do to not be in conflict with other people? Those are good questions, but really we should be thinking how can *we* maintain unity? The church is a *we* not an *I*. How can we, together, not have conflicts? How can we represent the beauty of the gospel to the lost world?

There are four practical suggestions I want to give to you that come from a IX Marks Journal. There is a whole journal put together on how to be a good church member. And there was one article entitled "Work for Unity." And this article lays out four ways we can practically work at being agents of unity within the church. The first, be a peacemaker. Be a peacemaker. So this goes beyond pursuing reconciliation in your own relationships. This is the encouragement to catalyze reconciliation among members who are at odds in your congregation. Where do we get this idea? Philippians 4, actually. If you flip your Bibles over to Philippians 4, you'll notice in verse 2, Paul says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my coworkers whose names are in the book of life." He calls out Eudoia and Syntyche in the letter to be read in front of the church, and then he says, "You church, you partners in the gospel, help them to reconcile." Suppose that you know that two members of your church are having a conflict. You can sit back and do nothing. That would be easy right? Sit back and do nothing and hope that the Spirit will work within their conflict. But Ephesians 4:1-3 calls you to

make every effort to maintain unity. What exactly that looks like on maintaining that unity with others that are in conflict within the church may be dependent upon the situation. In some scenarios you may actually call a meeting. You're like, "Hey you guys, we need to sit down." In others you might go to one party and encourage them from the Bible to go and be reconciled. You might read them Matthew 5 or Matthew 18. "You have something against your brother. They have something against you. Go! Go and pursue unity." It requires wisdom, but working for unity means being proactive in peacemaking. Be a peacemaker.

Second, be a connector. Be a connector. You may have noticed this that we often in our own nature are "cliquish" and "exclusive." We like to hang out with people that are like us. Left to ourselves, we naturally gravitate toward certain people at the expense of broader relationships. While these relationships can be helpful, they can also be harmful to unity. So we need to make sure that we are not simply gravitating toward a single group of friends within the church. Working for unity, calls us to do more to bring people together as a connector. One of the best ways you can do that is be like, "Hey, do you know this person in church? Here is [names of two church members]. [Names of two church members] meet [names of two other church members]. Have lunch together, see you later." Be a connector like that. Next time you have a group lunch at your home or you invite people over after church, invite two people who have completely separate social circles within the church. Allow your home to be a place where they can get to know one another and begin to form a friendship that they may otherwise have never developed. Be a connector.

Third, be a rejoicer and weeper. A rejoicer and a weeper. If we're going to work for unity, we need to rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who are weeping. Which might mean that we attend baby showers and funerals. Which might mean that we write notes of congratulations and write notes of sympathy. All of that requires us to know each other well enough, that we are actually aware when our brother or our sister is rejoicing and when they are weeping. Being with your church members in the highs and lows of their lives will go a long way toward building greater, more enduring unity. Be a rejoicer and a weeper.

And then finally, be gospel centered. Be gospel centered. Through the gospel, each member of your church, us together, we have been united to Christ through the gospel. Therefore each member of our church is united to one another. Given that we are going to spend all of eternity together worshiping our common Savior, as fellow citizens of heaven, unity in the here and now is worth fighting for. Be gospel centered! Fight for it! United we stand or divided we crumble. Brothers and sisters, if we're going to walk worthy of the gospel, we need to work at maintaining the unity of the gospel. Be humble, be gentle, be patient, bear with one another in love and work at maintaining unity with everything you have. Fight for it!

Walk in Newness of Life (Romans 6:1-4) by "Pastor Ethan"

Through this season of Lent we have focused on a very simple phrase from Paul's first letter to the believers at Thessalonica, Chapter 2, where he indicates that he encourages, comforts, and urges, not just them, but every believer who reads these words. These words were not just a letter to the Thessalonians that we get to look over their shoulders and read. These letters were written to the church of all ages, to every Christian who knows Jesus. These letters are for us, and he encourages, exhorts, urges you and me to walk worthy of God. Walk worthy of God. And I want to focus on one specific aspect of that today. We've been looking at a number of different aspects to the life and ministry of Christ. But for this final message in this series, we turn to Romans, Chapter 6, and I am going to begin reading with verse 1. [Scripture Reading]. God strengthen us in the reading and the explaining and hearing of his word.

Easter is God's explanation point for the work of Christ on the cross! It is God's definitive statement saying, "Amen and yes, it is done!" That is God's plan. The resurrection of Christ is God's fist coming down, the gavel coming down and saying, "Done!" The goal of our Lenten walk, as I just was talking about, is that we really as believers we want to grow and fulfill this exhortation which is throughout all of Paul's letters. This is definitely a New Testament instruction to us, walk worthy of God. And as those Thessalonians who first heard that specific phrase, they waited for the return of the risen Christ, to the home that He was preparing for them, and now to us. The risen King waits for us in all his glory and we are on the road until that time when we come to meet with Him. We are walking on this road of life.

Through the Lenten season we have been walking towards the cross. We've been walking towards the cross and the empty tomb. But in truth the cross and the resurrection are not simply the goal that we walk toward. They're actually the beginning. That's the reason that we do what we do. It is the source of our life because Christianity is not just simply figuring out how to walk better than we used to. If you look at the different themes that we have spoken of over these last weeks as just simply trying to live a better life or add disciplines or new things into your life, that misses the whole point. It's not exchanging the Old Testament system of works and laws for some New Testament system that gives us a new ethic or a new moral. It's not that at all. Yes, we walk with Christ to the cross but through our faith in Christ we join Him in the resurrection. And so, we trust the Savior, we trust the risen Savior, not a dead religious leader.

A follower of one of the world's great religions was asked about his path to Christ. Someone had noticed that he had become a Christian and they asked him about why he would choose to do such a thing. He had followed this other religion all his life and he pictured it this way. Life is a path down which he walks, and as he was walking, he came to a place where the two paths diverged. And down one he saw the founder of the religion that he had been following. And that founder had been dead for centuries. And then as he looked down the other path, he saw a very alive and vibrant and glorious Lord Jesus Christ. And he said, "I picked Him, He's the one that I want to follow."

And it is the following of the risen Christ that renews us and strengthens us to succeed walking worthy of God. Walking in a manner that fits the gift that we've received. Walking in a way that displays the truth of Christ and his resurrection. Really, really, walking in newness of life. Because of the cross and the resurrection of Christ, we have life.

And this new life is what we live. It is produced by the life that we have. Easter is God's exclamation point for the work of Christ on the cross. It's his stamp. It's his seal. It's as though Jesus came to the Lord with the final payment, the statement. That on this, it indicates that He had paid the entire debt of sin for the entire human race and God stamped it "paid in full" by raising Christ from the dead. Jesus satisfied the human race's obligation, overcoming all of our disobedience and all of our sin. Jesus was raised from the dead. He was not resuscitated in the manner that he resuscitated Lazarus or Elijah or Elisha or resuscitated other people. But rather He was resurrected. He was transformed from something similar. You could recognize it. It was his body, but it was brand new, and it was going to be fit for heaven. These bodies will not, they're not fit to go to heaven. They need to be changed, and Jesus was resurrected with that kind of body. The point is that the entirety of the debt of the human race's obligation to God because of our sin was paid in full when Jesus died on the cross. The issue is, however, if we don't accept what Jesus did for us in paying it in our place, then we can pay our own way.

You know, imagine in your life, total up what debts you have. Maybe you have a mortgage. Maybe you still have some college loans. Maybe you have a lot of credit card debt or home improvement loans. Maybe you have medical bills. Imagine somebody coming to you and giving you a check or writing out a check to the people you owe, and your debt was gone. Imagine if someone was able to do that for the whole state of Connecticut, for the government or for everybody in it or for the United States and everybody in it. Imagine what it would be like to live under the freedom of that debt being removed. I don't have a mortgage, but I understand that when people have that last mortgage payment and they finally own their house, there's a lightness, there's a joy, and there's a freedom. That only is a mild and a small comparison when we get the idea that Jesus paid in full what we lacked because of our sin.

He paid in full through the curse of God on the cross, experiencing the wrath of God on the cross. Think about the immensity of his suffering on the cross. He suffered a measure commensurate with what the world deserves because of its wickedness, because of its sin, everything we have done and left undone, everything we have said and left unsaid. God's news, God's good news, is this, the state of freedom and release from this debt is offered to all. It is offered freely to all who believe. It is offered to all, but it is only given to those who receive it, who accept it. And in that, it's sort of the simplest and yet it's the hardest part. We can't work, we can't pay, we can't labor, we can't try to undo things that we've done, but that's hard because that means we have to be humble.

It's the simplest and yet hardest response on our part. And I would ask you this morning, have you made that response? Have you recognized your piece of the debt that is owed to God? Have you recognized that? Have you acknowledged that you deserve to pay it yourself and that ultimately is separation from God? Have you grasped that Jesus on the cross paid it for you and He is willing to allow that to stand in your place if you will confess and you will receive that from Him? And then as the beautiful song goes, "Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe." I owe Him my life because of what He did for me in death. And so, the most important piece then is the response of my believing but then yielding and surrendering the allegiance of my life to Him. Lord Jesus, I want to give you what I owe you, and that is me.

See, here's what happens when we believe in this way. We are joined spiritually to what happened to Jesus on the cross. In Romans 6:3, Paul says, "Don't you know that all of

us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" Now, there's no water in this passage. This is not about a water baptism. This is about the immersion in or the joining to or the connecting with. And when we believed in Jesus, we were joined into his death spiritually on the cross. Paul uses the pictorial word *baptized* into his death, as a person is baptized, submerged into the water, we are joined that much to Christ. We're joined spiritually to Christ's suffering and death on the cross. My sin debt was taken from me, and it was placed with Him, and He suffered in my place, and I didn't bear it anymore.

A picture came to mind trying to grasp this. All of our Sunday messages over the last two years have been recorded here on my computer as I am doing this morning, and each message takes up a certain amount of disc space. Well, I was getting to the point where my computer says, "You don't have enough space. You need to get rid of some of this." So, I began the process of uploading messages from my computer to the cloud, to the account I have in the cloud. And as I would picture it on my screen, there were all of the files of the messages and they're being transferred from my space to the cloud. My space here to the cloud. And as I would watch, you know little by little when one of them was finished, there was a little cloud icon. It was no longer here, on my screen. I mean, it was on my screen, it was no longer here on my computer. It was on the Cloud.

I thought of that. If you were to imagine all of the sin in your life as a list of files—all, everything that you did, and the Lord knows. It is all a list of files that God sees as He looks. He sees all these files that represent what you did and what you didn't do. And, on the cross, all those files one by one, got transferred. Now, on my computer, it took days to transfer two years of messages up to the Cloud. On the cross, it was instantaneous. But I want you to think of it as taking time, just for purposes of illustration. And I want you to look back to all of the things that you know you've done. There's a lot more that you and I don't even realize that we've done this, there. But you're watching and all of sudden, this one has a little cross by it and this one has a cross by it and this one has a cross by it and this one has. And little by little by little, every sin has a little cross until at the very end the final sin has a cross. It's all been transferred from your space to Christ. And you don't have it anymore because He's carrying it. He carried it on the cross for you and you're wiped clean. You're now clean. You don't have that anymore. It's gone. You are baptized into Jesus' death. You are joined to Him in his death, and you are released, and you are made new. Second Corinthians 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold the new has come." And so, if you have been baptized into his death, you were buried then when He was buried, and you were raised with Him so that now you live a new life with none of all of that stuff that you are carrying around.

And today, in 2022, a person who believes in Christ is spiritually joined to that event that happened around A.D. 29-30. All of your sin was moved from your drive to his drive, and you don't carry it anymore. So, you were joined to Him as if you died on the cross. You were buried in the ground with Him as if you were there. And then, you were raised with Him. Verse 5: "If we were united with Christ in a death like Him, we will certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like Him. We know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. Anyone who has died is freed from sin, and we know if we died with Christ, we know that we will also live with Him."

So, you died with Christ on the cross. You were buried with Him in the tomb. You were raised with Him on the third day. On Ascension Day when He ascended to heaven, you

were ascended with Him. You are seated with Him at the right hand of God. Spiritually you are there while physically you are here. He has not left you alone. On Pentecost, He sent his Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in our hearts to take up residence in our lives. How *new* is that? We, you can't have anything that is newer than that.

I think of a picture of, say, a person who's been a convict in a penitentiary for many years and he receives a pardon. And when he receives the pardon, he walks out of the penitentiary, and he is a free man. And that record does not go with him. It's gone. He has a brand new fresh start. Or maybe you have been a woman who's had a bad heart and your dying heart has been replaced with a brand-new donor heart. And you walk out of the hospital with a brand new heart and a new strength in life. Or maybe you leave your attorney's office with a certificate that a benefactor has come and has, in fact, paid off all of your debts. And he has given you resources for going forth. All of these things are just pictures of the newness of life that the Lord has given to us, a reality.

Now many people, but not all, experience a flood of peace, a well of joy, a fountain of praise and gratitude. They experience in their hearts a term that the Bible says of being born again. It becomes an emotional heartfelt life experience. But not everybody experiences that. Those are feelings, and feelings come and go. There was a little diagram in an evangelistic book that we used in college. It was called *Train Diagram* and it was about faith. And in this train, there were three cars. There's an engine, a coal car, and a caboose. The engine represents the facts of God's word and promise. They're just really solid. Faith is the coal that feeds our connection to the engine. The caboose is our feelings, which go along for the ride. They tag along. They're fruit if they happen at all. You may have feelings, or you may not have feelings. The point is we don't rest on the reality of this new life by the basis by our feelings. It is nice when you and I can really experience newness. And I hope that you have, and I hope that you will, but don't question the reality of your relationship with the Lord because you don't have the feelings. It happens. It has to do with your heart commitment to the truth and that makes you *new*.

Now there is often evidence of this expression, when Paul writes here that "through the glory of the Father, we may lead a new life, we may walk in the newness of life." Just a few minutes thinking about the newness of life—one of things that you and I really need to remember is that the newness of life is not the end of problems. It is not the end of struggles that we have. It rather strengthens us as we go through them. So, newness of life is a new heart, it's a new outlook, it's a new foundation. It's strength in all of the old paths. And one of the things, this newness of life, the way it shows itself is that how we face temptations in life.

There are people who, when they experience this newness of life in Christ, immediately some of their sinful habits just drop away completely. I think of Zacchaeus in Scripture, that the tax collector who trusted Christ and immediately his life was, bang, transformed. "I am going to give back. I'm going to stop cheating." It was an amazing transformation. Some people it takes longer because habits are ingrained, choices are there, and the temptations are real. Just because you become a Christian doesn't mean you stop being tempted in the same ways you were tempted before. The difference is that you have new mechanisms inside. Number one, you become awake and alert to the fact that something that you wanted to do, that you know you shouldn't do, is out to get you. And you're alert, you're watching, you're paying attention. You're humble because you know that it's not in your own strength that you can resist. In fact, we're reminded that if it

weren't for the Lord's strength in our lives day by day, we would still live the same life that we lived before.

But don't beat yourself up, because that's human nature. Paul in 1 Corinthians says, "No temptation has overtaken you, but such as is common to all people." He is writing to believers. The things that you are tempted with are the same things that everybody has been tempted with and God has provided a way to strengthen you. And that is through his Word at work in our minds and at work in our hearts. And so, you and I have a new life to face temptations because we can seek Scripture, and the truth of Scripture and his promises. We can seek the strength of the Holy Spirit who enables us to make new choices. We can seek support of our new family who will encourage us and not judge us but help us to walk in forgiveness. When we face temptations, remember who you are: a son or a daughter of God, a brother or a sister of Jesus, a person with a new identity, a person whose old life died. When you sin as a Christian, you don't go back to being that old person. That person died and you have a new life. Instead, you have a new nature and that you want to express it.

As you were growing up did you ever disappoint your parents or grandparents? Do you, if you have adult children even, do they ever disappoint you? Does that mean that you disavow them? Did your parents disavow you when you did things that you knew are wrong? No! God in Christ does not disavow us. And that can give us a lot of peace when we stumble under temptation. Newness of life helps us to find victory in all the places that we used to stumble in. Newness of life gives us another perspective on all of the other kinds of struggles that we have. James 1:2-4: "Count it all joy brothers and sisters when you face trials of every kind. For you know that in the testing of your faith that produces steadfastness, and steadfastness will mature and make you make you mature and complete." The realization of this newness of life does not deliver us from struggles. In fact, sometimes it magnifies the struggles that you and I have. But it strengthens us as we change our perspective. Go down into the workshop of a craftsman and look at all the different tools that might be hanging on the wall. And each of the struggles that come into our lives is like one of those specific tools that has a specific purpose. It's working to accomplish a very specific goal in the media that it's being worked on. And you and I as believers can trust the Lord that the struggles come under his hand, and they are to help strengthen us and to shape us. Sometimes it is removing things that need to be excised from our life. Sometimes it's redirecting. Sometimes it's just shaping our character.

But don't ever minimize the depth of struggle. The struggles are real. There was a time, 2 Corinthians, Chapter 1, the apostle Paul said he even despaired of life itself because of the struggle he was in. But he continued to seek the Lord. The Lord was at work in his life. The body of Christ rose up and the struggle—he made it through. Our new life in Christ is an expression of the living of Jesus in us as we face the struggles that come. Our new life works in the fears that you and I have. You know, as we become Christians, people may not be happy with us. People may reject us, or they may turn against us. People may not like that you have become a believer. You may not be as fun a person, or they may feel like you're going to be judgmental. And so, you can deal with discomfort, disapproval, rejection, hostile reactions to all of that, but you know what, people treated Jesus the same way. And Jesus said if they treated him this way, don't you think that they would treat you and me this way as well? But, Romans 8:31, Paul says, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" God and you are a majority and so you and I, as we live forward, we do not have to be afraid

of people. It doesn't mean everything is going to be perfect in our relationships, but it means we have the strength to stay strong in Christ.

This new life helps us as we look at the future, and boy, in this future that we have, so much is unknown. What will be the outcome of this war that's going on? President Putin seems to keep rattling his sabers and talking about horrendous things that he's going to do if we don't just bow to him. And he may do them anyway no matter what anybody does. Do I know what he's going to do? No. Do you know what he's going to do? No. Does Jesus know what he's going to do? Absolutely!

So, we may have fears of the future, but this new life enables us to live forward because I know who holds the future, and He holds my hand. Jesus, in John 10:28: "I give my sheep eternal life. They will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand." Jesus knows what's coming. Jesus spoke to Peter of what was coming. And John at the end, the very end of John's Gospel, Jesus spoke with Peter, and He said the day is coming when people will take you where you do not want to go. And that was foretelling his death. And Peter then inquired about John, and Jesus said that's not your story. But Jesus knew exactly what was going to happen. And so, this combines the fears and the future, and that is the end of our lives. Whether that is going to be today, or whether that's going to be fifteen or twenty or forty years from now—the fears we have about death. John 11:25: "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though he die. And whoever lives believing in me will never die." The new life that you have in Christ is indestructible and the worst thing that can happen to you on earth is that you can die. But that just releases your spirit home. That just kills this earth shell that we have. So Paul says, "to live is Christ, to die is gain." And to depart from here and be with the Lord is better, all because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Paul said "we were baptized with Jesus into this death, so that as Jesus was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may walk in the newness of life." You and I have the eternal life in our hearts and lives. You and I have Christ's life in our hearts. We now may live that and express that until the day we finally go home.

There is a great theological document called the Heidelberg Catechism. It was written and the Reformed churches tend to use that for teaching about the faith. I first learned about it when I was in junior high school growing up as we had a youth class going through it. And the very first question of the Heidelberg Catechism is this: "What is your only comfort in life and death?" Here's the answer: "That I am not my own but belong with body and soul both in life and in death to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood. He has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head. Indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life. And He makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." We too, walk in the newness of life. This is the resurrection life that you and I have the privilege of walking in now. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power in us for us to live. Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

Is that your hope? Is that your confidence today? Is that a religious tenet that you know or is that something that you have embraced because you have personally committed your own life to Christ? Think of the reality of your life. Your life is represented by that list of files. A list of files that would appear on the screen if God called up the record of your life. He would see all of the files of life. All of the sin of life. Are you still paying for that yourself?

Or have you trusted in Christ? Have you given your life to Him? Have you asked Him to forgive you? Have you let Him wipe that clean because He took it himself on the cross? If you haven't, you're going to pay for it yourself with an eternity apart from Him. But right now, on this Easter Sunday as you think about the gift that He would relieve your screen of all of that sin. He would relieve you from the guilt of that sin because He bore it. Why not let Him? Why not ask Him? Why not do as the song says, "Jesus paid it all for me. All to Him I owe"? Will you give yourself to Him this morning? So that He can actually produce in you a life that you were meant to have.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus thank you that faith in Christ is not just another way to try to make ourselves better or improve. Not ways, that somehow, we can figure out how to look good enough to offset the wrong that we've done. Not to just keep going down meaningless, dead end paths of life. Building our castles on foundations of sand. Lord Jesus, when you died on the cross you cleared our drive of our sin. And you want to give that to us clean and fresh, a brand-new start. All we need to do is admit our need, our guilt. Acknowledge that you, the Son of God, died for us. Ask, Lord forgive me, cleanse me, come into my heart. Make me that new person and because I'm a new person. I live the new life that you have made me for. I ask today, now, Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022, make me yours. Lord, I know you always say "Yes" to that prayer prayed in sincerity. As you communicate that reality to a new son, a new daughter, that new life. Strengthen each of us as we go forth today, to live, to walk in the newness of life in you. We thank you for that today. We bless your holy name. Amen!

The Riches of Divine Grace (John 3:1-21) by "Pastor Forrest"

The Riches of Divine Grace. What we are talking about is what happened when you first trusted in Christ. What the Bible describes, things that you have because of that initial moment of faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's an interesting thing. You have it, but you may not know about it unless you pay attention to God's Word. And then you have to study a little bit and think it through. And this is what we are calling the riches of God's grace. And why we really want to emphasize it is because sometimes we forget who we are. We forget what God has already done for us. We forget, because in life we are going through our circumstances, and they are hard things and tests and challenges, and a lot of them are devastating. We think, I don't know if my life is going so well, I don't know if God has really got me. We start trying to think we're learning about God's care for us, not through his Word, not through our faith in Him, but through the challenges of our circumstances. We get pretty salty. And I don't doubt that you are going to come through that if you get that way, but what you're facing is a test that you are supposed to grow through. And your faith is supposed to get strengthened and hardened into hope, which is a constant expectation of God's promises. And you're really going to stunt your growth if you get bitter. What needs to be a faith response to God often is a "I'm really not sure He is there" response of unbelief. And the reason I am emphasizing on what God did for you, when you first trusted in Christ, is because this is who you are whether you feel like it or not. These things of the treasure chest of God's infinite riches toward you and his Son are yours right now. If you have the Son, then you have the life. And so, I think it is so helpful to pull these things out and think about them.

Now maybe you're not an extremist, maybe you're not having a hard time, where you're like "I don't really have a hard time, I'm not really struggling right now." Well then, stock up. This is the time to stock up, to fill your magazines and prepare for what is coming, because the hard times are coming. Maybe you're an extremist right now. "I don't know how to load this. I don't know how to do this." Well, that's the time when we need to set aside every other concern, disregard everything else that's going on and try to bring our entire attention on Jesus Christ, on his Word. And we will need the Spirit of God to equip us to do that. The Holy Spirit inspired John to write John 3 and we need God the Spirit to work in us so we can concentrate and derive from this spiritual meal the nutrition we need for living this eternal life.

So, we are turning a corner from an emphasis on this doctrine of the riches we have in Christ, from our position in Christ, from the places where union of Christ is emphasized. And the diamond just has several facets here. We are going to turn a corner and talk now about the things that are true because we were born again, blessings associated with our new birth. And right there we are into Christian jargon and some people do not even know this as biblical language. It became popular for American Christians to start talking about being born again right around 1976 when we had the first born again president, the famous Sunday school teacher, Jimmy Carter from Georgia. And born again became a cultural phrase that had no reference in the cultural understanding to its origin in John 3, where the topic is addressed. But we are going to talk about the new birth. If you're a believer in Christ, you may or may not know, but it is true if you're a believer that you have been born again. You do have new life that has been not imputed, listen carefully, not accounted to you, but imparted to you, at the moment of faith in Christ. And what we are trying to do, as

we edify, as we study the Word, as we seek to make disciples and teach and train, what we're doing is learning to live it. We have this life. Now walk by the Spirit, live it. And that's what we're studying, why we are studying the Word. This is the motivation piece, to say okay, I have this life, so how should then I live. So let's talk about having the life. Here's some categories the Bible describes in the New Testament of blessings that are yours because you are born again: the new birth itself, the fact that you are called Sons of God, in context in Galatians 4 and Romans 8, that means heirs. The Bible says in Corinthians Chapter 5 and elsewhere that you are new creatures in Christ. You are a new Creation in Jesus Christ. When is the last time you've thought about that? I hear a lot of people offering change, and hope. I hear a lot of things that are prescribed for us. The one minute video feed clicker, that's a change of my attention, I guess, from one minute to the next, on this or that interesting funny thing people are doing on the internet. But have you thought about the fact that the moment you trusted in Christ you became a new creature, new identity, new capacity, new responsibility? Maybe you've been a campaigner for a long time. Maybe you're like me and you came to know Jesus Christ as your Savior more than 40 years ago. Maybe it's been a long haul for you. It's still the new birth. And we can be refreshed in the knowledge that I am a new creature in Christ. And, yes, I have a sinful nature, but I'm also a new creature. The biblical New Testament doctrine of adoption is not American adoption. It is the identification of you as an heir of God. It is identifying your inheritance when we talk about adoption.

And also the New Testament says you possess eternal life. And you have a new Spirit in you, that God has placed in you in 1 Corinthians 2:12, and I believe that reference specifically means the Holy Spirit, and that is another paragraph of our riches of divine grace, in the Spirit. We'll have a whole study on that. But I just want to talk about the fact that you're regenerated, that you're born again. Now Jesus tells Nicodemus, on the night that he visits him in private. He says, you must be born again, or born from above. And the way that topic is introduced in John, the Gospel of John—you need that life that Jesus is offering and you don't have it unless you get it from him. And that's the way this is introduced. And I am approaching it for you believers in Christ, the recipients of the Gospel of John, the Word of God in the New Testament. You are the audience, the target audience of the New Testament revelation. I am approaching this for you to understand what happened, that you have been born again. Own it! Don't own it culturally and say that "Yes, I am a born again Christian" and not think about what that means. Own the fact that you have not just been brought into the family, you have been begotten by God as his child.

If you want to read in John 3 with me we will survey the landscape a little bit, a quick read over, and then I want to get into some details in John 3 because it's such a well-traveled passage. We love it so much, we memorize it, we teach the kids. So much of our theology derives from it and want to drill down especially for you who are so familiar, because there is so much there we may not have noticed if we're not watching in detail. "Now there was a man of the Pharisees, Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews." Jesus will call him, the teacher of the Jews, but he's a ruler. Nicodemus, a common name in the first century, a fairly common name—it is a Greek name but has an Aramaic cognate and it means the ruler of the people. That's what Nicodemus means.

This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi we know that you've come from God as a teacher, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." Did Nicodemus come at night because he's timid, because he's got status in the community

and he doesn't want to face Jesus publicly, because he doesn't know how it's going to turn out? It's a status question? Some interpreters have taken it that way. But what's more important than that question is, why does John introduce it here in this point. In John's Gospel, the issue is light and darkness. The issue is light and darkness. And in John 3 the conversation with Nicodemus is a man coming to him in the darkness who needs the light. And in John 4 it's a woman at noon day, the woman at the well, the Samaritan woman who comes to Jesus, who moves from darkness into the light of her witness for Christ. Nicodemus is in the dark, and he needs to embrace the light.

And that is the theme that Jesus is addressing. "Jesus answered and said, 'Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.'" And did a rabbi maneuver. The rabbi conversation is a well-known trope. It's a well know thing that would happen. There would be point, counterpoint. There would be somewhat of a debate, an argument to who knows the Scriptures better. Who's got a better read on it? Who can arm wrestle to be the teacher in the event? And it won't be surprising that the apostle of Jesus presents Jesus as the teacher in the rabbi interaction. So does Nicodemus say, you're the rabbi, you're the teacher? Nicodemus is going to have very little to say toward the end. In fact his words narrow down. He starts with a lot to say and then it narrows down where Jesus is the only one speaking, and then you have John's summary, theological commentary on the encounter. But Nicodemus says, "How can a man be born again when he is old?" See in John 3:3, Jesus changes the subject in a way from what Nicodemus asked to what he really wants to know. Nicodemus says, he didn't ask a question, he just says, "You're the teacher; you're from God." And then Jesus tells him, "You need to be born again." It's a challenge. It takes the conversation right where it needs to go. And as we saw in the men's huddle yesterday, in John 4, we're seeing a model of how to do interaction with people as Jesus interacts in this one-on-one thing.

The issue is who is Jesus Christ? What does He offer? What do I do with that? He is alone the solution to the great need of man, because he's the only one who can take away your sins and thereby provide a relationship with God. That's why, John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." But Jesus says the shot across the bow. You may identify that I'm a correct teacher, that I'm from God, that I have these signs and wonders, but you need a miraculous new birth. Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old. He cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born again, can he?" And Jesus answered, "Truly, truly I say to you " the second time he said it, "*Amen, amen.* Truly, truly I say to you." In other words, most assuredly you need to listen to this and take notes. "I say to you unless one is born of water and the Spirit one cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I say to you, you must be born again." Now think about this, the great man of Israel, Nicodemus, was just commanded not to be amazed. That is not benign language in a rabbi encounter. You should know this. Jesus is entering into accountability with Nicodemus, and holding him in an uncomfortable accountability I think, by saying, "Do not be amazed."

And he gets more terse. He gets stronger with Him. He says, "The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it's going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit." But if we read that verse in Greek, we would hear, "The *pneuma* blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going, and so is everyone who is born of the

pneuma." He uses the same word twice and the English translator that said *wind* once and *Spirit* the other time. They even capitalize Spirit because the Holy Spirit is the agent in regeneration. But the point I'm making is wind and spirit are the same word in Greek, because there is a play-on-words. And this is very common, apparently, in Jesus' teaching. The beloved disciple brings it out a lot in his Gospel, and we ought to do a year on the gospel of John for sure.

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Okay, I give up, how can it be, and Jesus answered with strong and mighty and humiliating accountability. What he says: "Are you the teacher of Israel and you do not understand these things?" Are you the teacher of Israel but you are not born again, you do not have the life? You don't have what's offered throughout the Scriptures? "Truly, truly I say to you, we speak of what we know, and testify of what we've seen, and you do not accept our testimony." Beloved, I think that when you ask the question about the Old Testament saints, the believers of the Old Testament, who believe in the promise of the coming Messiah—and then Jesus came and now we have the revelation of Christ, so we believe and look back at what he did on the Cross. Then it's always been faith alone, in the Messiah of Israel alone. That has been salvation from Adam to the end of human history. But when we deal with this, we want to say, "But what about those that were believers, Old Testament saints, but when Jesus came they didn't recognize him?" I think Jesus answers that in John 10. I don't think there is any such sheep that didn't hear his voice. I don't think there was any such person that was a believer but then rejected the Messiah. And this is somebody who has not trusted in the Messiah of Israel. "Truly, truly we speak of what we know and testify of what we have seen, and you do not accept our testimony." Listen, please, to what John is doing as he puts a mirror up for anyone who is not listening to the Messiah, to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, in the flesh of mankind. You need to trust him. You need to believe whatever He has to tell you. If he tells you to eat his flesh and drink his blood in John 6, try to figure out what he means. Try to figure out what he means. And I'll try to tell you what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean magic at the communion table. But it does mean that only in Christ, by trusting in him and his work, can you have the life that you were designed by God to have. "Truly I say to you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen, but still you do not accept our testimony." That's in red letters in my red-letter Bible. That is Jesus speaking to Nicodemus. Nobody knows God, like God the Son knows God. And that's what He is going to say now.

"If I told you earthly things and you did not believe, how would you believe if I tell you heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven, but he who has descended from heaven, the Son of Man." See, I have come from God, and I have the Word of God, and that's why the apostle John begins his gospel in the inspiration of the Spirit, with "The Word became flesh." He is God's self-disclosure, God's revelation to Man, the ultimate manifestation of God, so that we would know God. And He came from Heaven. He is the Son of Man prophesied, especially in Daniel 7.

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." What is that about? That's the story, the event, the history in Numbers where Israel needed a Savior because God had sent poisonous snakes among them, and they were getting bitten and getting sick and headed towards death. And God told Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and, stick it up on a pole, and when Israel looked to the bronze serpent that he lifted up with a pole they would be healed, they would be saved. And so Jesus references this typological event to point to how to have the life. He would be lifted up, and what

people would do was look at Him with the eyes of faith. See, faith is the issue in the gospel of John, and it is referenced in many different ways. Eating and drinking portrays faith. Looking portrays faith. It is a little more faith, listen, than none at all. The trusting of a child, Jesus says, "You must become like one of these." It is the belief in the testimony of the one who is speaking the truth, in this case, and always, Jesus Christ. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whoever believes, will in Him have eternal life."

Now some commentators, most evangelical commentators that are New Testament scholars, will say that this is the end of Jesus' words, in the dialogue between him and Nicodemus. And then you have John the apostle, as commentator, explaining, theologically explaining what follows. So John 3:16 they take as the beginning of John's exposition. And literarily, I think that may well be the case. My English Bible keeps it in red letters all the way through to verse 21. But notice that in verse 16 it says, "For God so loved the world. For God so loved the world." They think that this is John saying okay that this is the explanation of what he just said, that you must believe in the Son of Man. "For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be save through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged. He who does not believe has been judged already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men love the darkness rather than the light. For their deeds were evil. For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But he who practices the truth, comes to the light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God." Notice that in verse 21, he who practices the truth begins as a category with the Lord Jesus Christ, the only one who has ever done, said and executed only truth and righteousness. His deeds have been manifested as having been wrought in God. And you and I who walk in the power of the Spirit, after our Savior—can be demonstrated that our deeds, in the power of the Spirit have been wrought in God.

John 3:1-21, the famous Nicodemus, you must be born again passage, we've introduced it. We're talking about the riches of divine grace and I want to show you very interestingly verse 3 begins the challenge that surfaces the issue that Nicodemus is not asking, but he needs. And I am optimistic about this based on the rest of the Gospel of John. I think Nicodemus believed. I think he will be numbered among church age believers actually. But Jesus' answer, this is the Greek and English *apocrythe*, Jesus answered and said to Him, very often in John this is the formula for introducing a quotation, a lot of words to introduce a quotation, "And He said, '*Amen*, *amen*, I am saying to you.'" *Amen*, *amen*, this is a Jesus sort of idiom, the way he spoke when he is successfully emphasizing something. Now I don't think *truly, truly* quite gets it, and I'll tell you why, because the root of *amen* is a Hebrew word, and it means faith or faithful, *amman. Amman* in *hyphal* is to express faith. *Amman* in *nyphal* is to be faithful—it's God, it's faithful. And so *truly* is a different word group in Greek. It doesn't mean true. But it's tradition and so we've translated it *truly*, *truly*. And it is true what he is saying, but here's the problem, everything that Jesus says is take-it-to-the-bank true! So, I'm just taking a little bit of a nuanced issue with this translation *truly, truly*. One possible interpretation is *most assuredly,* meaning "you need to be certain of this," so I'm underscoring it or bringing emphasis. And another is that it is a trustworthy statement, "You can be sure of this," emphasizing assurance. Most assuredly I'm saying to

you, except someone be begotten from above, he is not to see the Kingdom of God. Thank you for not throwing your hymnals, or your pew Bibles, or any beverages that you might have brought into the auditorium since we don't have carpet. Thank you for not throwing those at me for the way I've translated John 3:3. But if you notice that it sounds unfamiliar in several of the words, and therefore seems discordant with what you have memorized, welcome to the club. When you read it in Greek, you have to deal with a passive aorist subjunctive from *genato*, which men can do, by the way. Men can do this verb. If it means to give physical life, birth, and then we have a problem, which was only anticipated retroactively by the insanity of 2022 that men are giving birth. That's too complicated a way to joke about that. *Genato* means to beget. Its most common usage in the Gospels is in the Matthew genealogy, when Matthew says he begot, and then this father begot, and then this father begot. It means to beget, to have a child. Now we know biologically that involves multiple steps, concluding in what we call "birth," and when we use that English word of birth or childbirth. To use, to translate this word, we are probably getting more specific biologically. Think about it, how are you spiritually birthed? There is no mother; there is no womb; there is no gestation process. That's not, these are not the meaning of the word that he is saying. It is begotten. And we're going to hear more about Jesus in John 3:16 that Jesus is the only-begotton, *monogenesh*, from the same word of *genato*, right here. Interesting.

Most assuredly I am saying to you, except one be begotten. I want to point out something that doesn't jump out at us in English, but it's obvious, now think about it, it's passive. It's a passive verb. You cannot beget yourself. We joke about it. Those dishes aren't going to wash themselves. You really can't do anything about being begotten. Somebody else has to do that for you. And the beginning, God is your Father, and you're now his child, he begets you as a child. In that sense is the new birth that we are discussing. It is his grace to you. Furthermore, maybe you know this. This word *anothin* is an adverb, and it's probably best translated *from above*, almost always means *above.* But we translate it *again.* And the reason we do it—because it can mean *again,* and because Nicodemus says, "Do I have to go back in the womb and be born a second time?" Because Nicodemus misinterprets what Jesus is saying. He doesn't understand it, and very likely, as we see in John in several places, Jesus is giving a *parenamasiea* or double entendre, a double meaning. He is giving you a pun, dad jokes people! He is saying two things with one word. It is a second birth and it does come from above. But, the sense I believe Jesus means is that you must have a spiritual birth that God alone provides, a new begetting from God, a new birth. Now I hope we are not totally confused. English word *birth* is a specific biological event. The Greek word *beget*, *genato*, can mean that. It can also mean conceive. It can mean the process by which someone is eventually, as we would say in English, born, and you can't bring English specificity, especially biological specificity and medical specificity into something that is a broad term, with multiple possible senses in Greek. It's broad. And I think that's by God's design.

Except that God beget you as his child, except that you are born again, you have this new re-creation—we call it regeneration—you cannot even see the kingdom of God. In context, I think that Jesus' words are full, full of challenge to Nicodemus who—I'm with you Lord. You must be from God because no one does your signs. We know you're from God. "You don't know what you need to know" is kind of the sense when he says, "You're not able to see the kingdom of God." You may know that you've seen my signs, and you may

know that I'm from God, but you are not going to see the kingdom unless God does something miraculous to you. If you don't know Christ as your Savior today, please take the warning from the mouth of Jesus Himself. You must receive this regeneration blessing from God that we call the new birth.

I want to then look in some detail into what Jesus challenges him from Numbers and what follows. In verse 14 he says "And just as Moses lifted up," *upsato*, "lifted up the serpent in the wilderness," just like that, *thus*, the comparison in Greek. Everybody's with me on the Greek having a good linguistic basic for making logical assertions. Everybody with me on Greek? There is a philosophical, logical reasoning tradition in the Greek language by the time John writes this. I mean there has been going for 500 years at this point and longer if you consider Greek philosophy. *Just as* is a logical construction. Just as, so, it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up. He said it's necessary, in verse 3, that if you're not born again you cannot see the Kingdom.

Now he said that it's necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up. Now what's the comparison between Jesus and Moses—between what Moses does by lifting up the serpent and Israel looks at it and what Jesus does? If you would consider Jesus Christ and apply, in your faith, what he did on the cross for you, that he died on the cross for your sins, that he is your Savior, then like Israel receiving temporal healing you will receive eternal life, eternal healing. The signs and wonders that Jesus did are less, all of them—the physical healings of the blind, the lame, and the leper. They are all less than the miracle of your new birth, because you will never perish but have eternal life. Because though our physical body will die, we will be in the presence of God in our spirit, and then we will be reunited with our body in the resurrection to rule with Christ forever. And that's much bigger than "Lazarus, stand up and walk." But "Lazarus stand up and walk" points to it. This word *to be lifted up* is certainly Jesus pointing to the way He would die.

I once had a friend that did a research paper for class, for a history class, about the various ways in the ancient world through history, through known history, people have tortured their convicts to death. The way they have gone through capital punishment. It's very interesting in our culture we have this cruel and unusual punishment issue, in our Constitution, and so they're constantly fighting for the exact way Genesis 9:6 is to supposed to be carried out. And most people, in our country, have no idea that the foundation of our human government from God is in Genesis 9:6, with the institution of capital punishment. Check that out some other time, you know, a reading assignment. Check out Genesis 9. When human government was delegated to man, it's capital punishment. It's capital punishment as the beginning move. And so what I'm saying is this research paper is all these different ways these people have executed their convicts, carried out their capital punishment. Of course you have Madame La Guillotine, from the French Revolution, which is so distinct from what happened here. It's almost unbelievable anyone would ever compare the French Revolution to the War for American Independence. That's a public thing. They march you up to the gibbet, they put your head down in the thing, and the knife comes down, and the big chopper. There have been, no doubt, many more executions by beheading, using sword or axes, going back to the Roman Empire. Very likely, the Apostle Paul was killed by an axe, by a Roman executioner using the axe, which is an ancient symbol for government, because of this function of capital punishment—possibly a sword, but likely an axe. So many different ways that people have done this. You have the rope used so much through recent history actually. Breaking someone's neck to kill them, the

insanity of the electric chair. Oh, we've figured out how to harness electricity. Let's pass this through somebody and end their life, and let them sit in the hot seat, as they called it, and end their life that way. This is really not a very great, fun conversation, talking about methods of capital punishment. There are tortures people have been through. There is boats torture. I forget what people group did this thing, but it's horrendous. It's been considered one of the worst things, because it's a death by exposure to just the sun and whatever predators can fly to you and get you while you're out on a boat. And they just send you adrift and you just die slowly as your body shuts down from sunstroke. Just horrible ways people have carried out capital punishment. And most of these have been public ways of doing it. People have gathered around on the shores for the boat execution. You have the crowd inevitably for the decapitation. Think about the cowboy, the west, and how they would have the gallows in all the westerns and they would hang them high. It's always a public thing, but only one that I can think of is a billboard.

There is only one method of capital punishment that I know of in world history when they actually tack someone up to a post and hang them for everyone to see, where the person is the sign on the post. Crucifixion was the Romans saying, "Don't mess with us, this could be you," I believe is what Crucifixion ultimately means. It is horrific for the observer who takes heed to himself that I not step in the way of the Romans because they will crucify us like in the Spartican Rebellion. They crucified thousands of slaves who had had this uprising, every few feet on the Roman road. They would crucify another slave to say don't do this. Don't try to rebel against us. It's a placard. It's a Roman way of saying don't cross us, no pun intended, or we will crucify you. And the person himself is a message. Now public capital punishment has always been that way. It's always been the person is a message. I don't want that to happen to me or my kids. But this is like an explicit, they're going to post you up, like a sign, while you die of really an excruciating, excruciating set of events ultimately. And I believe this is how crucifixion kills you, ultimately, by suffocation. Crucifixion was a death by suffocation, ultimately. That is why at the end of the crucifixion story in the gospel, they are about to break their legs, because the Jews are putting pressure to get everybody off their crosses for the Sabbath. We have the Sabbath coming so they go and break their legs, because it is the legs that hold them up so they can breathe. But once, if you're suspended by your arms, you have no power in your legs, which they would break their legs, then you're hanging by then just your shoulder. Of course it's excruciating pain as they go out of socket. If it's one of those common crucifixions when they nailed your hands, then you have the excruciating pain through all the nerves in your arms and in your wrists. But while that's carrying your weight and your shoulders are dislocating, you are losing your capacity to breathe because your body weight is weighing down, on your diaphragm and then on your lungs. And eventually, the person loses the ability to fight to breathe. That's the Roman crucifixion. Jesus did not die by suffocation. He exhaled his spirit, it says. But that's the way the Roman crucifixion works, and it's horrible. The word excruciating means "from the cross." It's a Latin word, "from the Cross."

So what's the point? The point is that Jesus Christ, from eternity past, was marked out to die publicly, in this unique method of public execution, as a placard, as a poster for the world to look at. There arguably is no more public way to put someone up in front of the world as they're dying than crucifixion. And there he is. The cross of Jesus Christ, the most humiliating moment in all of human history, where man has destroyed, is destroying the only perfect, sinless man. So many ways that we are humiliated by what the cross, by

what happened at the cross. And yet, it is in Jesus humbling himself before the Father that you and I are forever exalted. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so it is necessary that the Son of Man be lifted up. Now this is before, obviously before the event that Jesus is saying it. He is prophesying the method of his death. *So that* I must be lifted up, *so that*, there's a reason why. So that *everyone*, *pas* is a singular pronoun, could be translated *all* if it's plural, but in this case *every, everyone*. Now the person is defined by a participle. Everyone who believes. *Eis*—usually Greek students first year, they translate *eis* as into—into him. And half the time or so when John talks about faith its *eis*, it's into, it's more of a dynamic use of a preposition. But it just means *in*. It's the same with him as the object. The person who believes in Him will not perish, but he will have, *so that* he will have eternal life.

The purpose of the crucifixion dogmatically stated in John 3:14-15, is so that everyone who believes in the Messiah will have eternal life. If you're looking at a New American Standard or an NIV or ESV it doesn't have "will not perish" in that. They think that was a scribal error. But the majority of manuscript, the vast majority and all different language manuscripts will always have this. So I think it does say it twice, "will not perish and have eternal life," so it's a double promise. And then our favorite verse 16: "For thus God loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life." In passing I just want to point out that there is a fairly rare construction that we don't see very much in Greek. But you have these two particles that in other Greek literature go together, *houtos* and *hoste*. And so they're forming some sort of unit, and the relationship between the two clauses is established. And so I put them in blue here, for *thus*, this is the word that your English Bible translates *so*. *Thus* and *so*, grammatically they're often interchangeable; they mean the same thing. But what happens is we take this to mean the degree of God's love, and I suspect that the degree of God's love is in view. He sent his Son. But I think that there is something else that is very helpful for us.

What does love look like? What does love look like? To most American children, love looks like someone stretching out their arms to embrace you. And that's love, that's affection, that family affection. But the love we are talking about here, stretches out your arms and dies for you, and gives itself, the person gives himself for you. And that's the way God has loved us. So I think that it's correct, as the New English Translation and the Holeman Christian both do this. They say "thus," this is how God loved you. How do I know God loved me? He gave his Son for me. What did God do to express his love for me? He gave me his Son.

This is important, Christians. You are commanded to *agape*, like Christ has loved you. You're supposed to love like he did. It's self-sacrificial, it's self-abdication. I don't think of me. I'm thinking of what does God want for you and I'll do what God wants for you with whatever resources I have. That's Christian love. It's not love your neighbor as yourself. It's an advance. It's "a new commandment I give you, love one another as I have loved you," John 13:34 says. I think that's what you're seeing here, and it's very important for us. There is no love by saying, "Be clothed, be fed, be well." That's not loving the person. You haven't sought their best for God's interest. This love, self sacrificially, doesn't just affectionately "I just love everybody, I'd like to buy the world a Coke, I feel so much peace toward all men." That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about that love that issues forth in the death of Christ on the cross. It's like if you have a pump, you people who understand

mechanics no better than I do. If you have a pump that needs to have a medium in it in order to run properly, like a well pump or something—if your well runs dry, and the well pump stops running then that's a problem, cause there is no water in that pump and it needs the resistance of the water to function properly. And eventually what's going to happen to that pump if there is no water in it. It's just going to run and burn up, 'cause it's going to function outside of it's design. I think this is how love and the actions of love go together. You have to have the motivation of I want what God wants for you. That is the motivation of *agape* love, but then I act on it or my love has stopped. I didn't really love you to the point of action. "Thus, God loved the world, He gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life or eternal life." I believe that if you and I want to keep Jesus' commandments of loving one another, we better figure out what God means by love and John 3:16 is the clearest place that I think we could point to.

"For God did not send his Son into the word in order to judge the world." We have this really interesting logical construction here, the *hinna* plus the subjunctive. It happens a lot in the New Testament. And here it is expressing the purpose of the Father sending the Son. Why did He send Him? It wasn't to judge the world. Jesus is coming back a second time to judge the world. He sent the Son into the world the first time for this reason, so that the world would be saved through Him. The purpose of the first advent of Christ is our salvation. What does the world do with the message of the first coming of Christ? They take it as we're being judgmental. We're being self-righteous. I don't want to deal with a God that's like that. That's saying I'm not good enough. And there is an inherent judgment in the presence of God next to our sin. Ask Isaiah, in Isaiah 6. When you come face to face with perfect righteousness, you become very aware of your shortcomings, of where you don't measure up. We all do this. One of you likes to stand next to me and see if you're taller than me yet. There is always going to be this comparison, right? You got your nice new car. You show up at whatever and there is someone there has another car and you start comparing. Do that with God's perfect righteousness and what you bring to the table. Of course the gospel is judgmental, but it's judgmental of our need. That's the darkness. We are in it, and we need the light. So Jesus came to bring the light, not to judge the world, but because there is a judgment that is inevitable and Jesus is the only solution to that judgment. And that is what John summarizes here in the most theological of the Gospels, the most theologically interested in what is going on between God and man. Jesus' offer of salvation is so that you could be saved.

But there is a judgment. He who believes in Him is not judged. But he who does not believe has been judged already. See the judgment is there, because God is. Whether Christ came or not, there would be the judgment. This is the judgment. He who has not believed has been judged already because he has not believed in the Name of the only begotten Son of God. I'll give you a second to take in this slide. We've slowed it down a bit. How many times does it say believe here? What do I do with Christ? What do I do about the gospel? You know, He gave himself for me. I can give myself right back! That's not the gospel. Lord here, take these filthy rags, I want you to have them, they're for you. Right? It turns out when you trust in Christ, he does get you, all of you. And you're his and you can't do anything about it. Better recognize that, post haste. But the way you come to Christ is not by giving Him something. It's by receiving what He gives you. It is faith in Him. He who believes in Him is not judged, but he who does not believe has been judged already. And

what is the basis of that judgment? Because he hasn't believed. I don't think it gets any clearer in the New Testament, including Paul's letters. It doesn't get any clearer than this. What's the basis for God's judgment? "Well, he already paid for the sins on the cross so aren't all the people saved?" No, they have to trust in Christ.

The way you appropriate the work He did for you on the cross is by faith. And He did die for your sins, so you need to trust in Him and you need to do it today. Now this is the judgment, that the light shined in the world, that's God revelation of himself, and the men loved the darkness more than the light. For their works were evil. This is our condition. Do you ever feel that? Do you ever feel the call to darkness? It's easy to feel that today in this culture. We're a post-Christian civilization. Paul did not deal with what we are dealing with. He was a pre-Christian civilization. He was going to the Roman Empire and talking to people who have no idea except they knew about these Jews that were spread throughout in their synagogues. But they had no idea of God the creator who created them for himself and sent his Son to die for them. He is introducing the concept to the world. We are in a post-Christian civilization. They've received the gospel and the culture has now rejected the gospel, and now we're waiting for whatever the new thing is. They're going to get it. Of course we know there is nothing new. Satan's attacks on the human race continue. This is the passage that establishes the doctrine of the new birth. And the way you get it, Jesus says, is to trust in Him, to look to the one who is lifted up for you, and receive the life that He alone can offer. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul says, and you will be saved.

As we close, I want to read what John also says about the love of the Father, because I want you to know that God does indeed love you. He always has, and the way you know it is what we just read. It says in 1 John 4:9, " By this the love of God was revealed, or manifested to us, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world, so that we might live through him. And this is love." This is where it comes from. "And this is love, not that we love God." We didn't start this love, but God. It's not how it works. "And this is love, not that we loved Him, but that He loved us and sent his Son to be the satisfaction, the propitiation for our sins." How do I know that God loves me? Now listen this is where the shoe leather lives with you as a believer. I'm going through hard times. Is He there? I'm talking to Him. Is He listening? I'm having trouble. Is He there? The way you know that God loves you is that He sent his Son to die for you and you go back to that initial, and awesome and infinite gift, and you thank him for it with Philippians 4:6 and you ask for your requests with thanksgiving.

The Promise (Galatians 3:15-18) by "Pastor Garrett"

Well, a few weeks back we considered what Paul writes in Galatians 3 about how Jesus became a curse for us in order to redeem from the curse of the Law. We recognize then that Jesus was crucified in our place and died as a substitute for our sins so that in Christ we might share together the covenant blessings that God announced to Abraham multiple millennia ago. And we recognize then that a preeminent feature of our covenant blessings is receiving the indwelling presence of the promised Spirit through faith. And we had such a great opportunity last week on Pentecost to remind ourselves and celebrate many facets of the Holy Spirit's ministry to us. We recognize because of the Holy Spirit that those whom God justifies, those whom He recognizes as righteous, have the Holy Spirit poured out into them. And in mentioning the way the Holy Spirit was promised long ago, Paul is looking back in time to the promise that was made to Abraham that all of the nations of the earth would be blessed in him. And even as Paul looks backward, he also looks forward to the time in the way in which God will use the Holy Spirit to lead his children to the new life of liberty and love that belong to all who come to faith through Jesus Christ. When the Holy Spirit moves into us, he unites us with Christ in such a real and such a powerful way that all of Christ has become ours. The covenant that God made with Abraham and the promise it contains is one hundred percent dependent upon God. And we know that God ultimately fulfills his covenant plan in Jesus Christ. So Paul wants to be sure that his readers grasp what a magnificent and what a practical gift God's promise is. God's promise is irrevocable and unchangeable and so as Paul writes on, he shifts our attention away from his backward glance at Scripture and biblical history, and he begins to show us the truth about God's promise and how that promise reaches into and touches every aspect of our everyday life today.

Please open your Bibles to Galatians, Chapter 3:15. As we read this we will consider the highly personal and amazingly relevant implications that this portion of God's Word has for us right here, right now. I invite you to please stand as we come to the reading of God's Word. [Scripture reading.] This is God's holy, living Word for us today. Please be seated. I want to be sure as we launch into this this morning that you don't overlook the term with which Paul addresses his original readers in verse 15. Notice he calls them brothers. And although this term of endearment will show up another seven times in the Galatian letter, Paul has not called his readers brothers since Chapter 1:11. And despite the fact that Paul calls out the Galatians for being confused, despite the fact that he calls them for being foolish and bewitched, and even though Paul feels betrayed and perplexed and deeply saddened about the Galatians, Paul still recognizes and calls them his brothers. Such an important reminder to us that no matter what disagreements and disputes may pop up in our dealings with one another, we must never forget or overlook the divine nature of the relationship that binds the body of Christ together. This is a paramount point in Paul's writing to us right here. It's really on the top of his mind, all about the family of God. And throughout this section in Galatians we are going to see time and time again that Paul will press hard on family concerns and family matters. Things like what makes a family a family, and who are the true children of Abraham, who has a right to inherit the blessing promised to Abraham, and who is it exactly that we are to call and embrace as brothers and sisters in Christ.

The illustration that Paul sets before us today from everyday life in verse 15—it really concerns the process of making your last will and testament. The process of making a will is what Paul wants us to think about when he mentions here a man-made covenant. A last will and testament expresses the desires and the intentions of one party. While a will may or may not involve other specific parties, a last will and testament is initiated by one person and one person only. The provisions that a will contains will flow in one direction only, from the person who makes the will to those who are to become his or her beneficiaries. For instance, if you go to a lawyer and have that lawyer draw up a will describing how you want your assets to be handled and distributed after your death, that document, once it is signed and witnessed, cannot be changed. No one, including you, can go back and alter or revoke what is spelled out in that document. If your circumstances change or later on you change your mind about something you cannot go back to your lawyer and ask him to get out the jar of white out or cross out parts of it in order to make revisions. No, in our contemporary legal system, you actually need to make a brand new will, which of course requires you to send a whole new set of fees to your lawyer. Imagine that. The new will must specifically state that it supersedes any previous wills you have made and as you well know the presence of multiple wills is often the occasion of many a family feud. As we say in the wonderful world of opera, where there's a will, there's a fight. In our day a will only takes affect when the person who made it dies. You may be told by a parent or a relative or a friend that when they die you will receive X, Y, or Z, but as long as they remain alive you receive no tangible benefit from that promise other than a certain level of hope or expectation of what the future may hold.

However, in Paul's day in the Jewish culture of the first century it was possible to handle things in a different way from that with which we are most familiar today. Jewish inheritance laws made it possible for a person to make an irrevocable inheritance gift to another person prior to one's death, and in fact that is the practice that serves as the backdrop to Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. If you know Jesus' story, you know that the younger son goes to his father and asks to receive from his father his share of the inheritance now, pay on demand. To our modern ears, that sounds so wrong, so selfish, so grabby. We look at this money grubbing son and we say, "Bad boy, bad boy." But such a premature distribution of assets was not uncommon in the culture of that time. As you can see, giving and receiving an inheritance in this way becomes completely unalterable because as is the case in the prodigal son account, when the money is gone, it's gone.

And that is the practice that undergirds Paul's point in verses 15 and 16 about the series of irrevocable promises that God makes to Abraham and his offspring in Genesis 12 and 15, which are further summarized for us in Genesis 17. In Genesis 15:12-17 we read about the way that God extends these promises and then ratifies his promises by passing through a blood sacrifice that He instructs Abraham to set up. In an ordinary covenant ratification ceremony of this time, both parties who are making an agreement would pass together between the slain animals, and the blood of the animals would symbolically ratify whatever agreement was being made between these two parties. But in the case of the covenant that God establishes with Abraham and his offspring, only God walks in between the pieces of the slain animals indicating the way that God's covenant is unilateral. It is entirely unconditional and the obligation to fulfill that covenant rests entirely upon God and God alone.

This is in effect God's last will and testament to sinful humanity. A promise is being made at this moment that sin and the curse that sin then brings with it, which is death, will be dealt with. While Abraham and his faithful descendants look forward in faith to the way that God will finally fulfill his promise and grant to them their inheritance, when Christ the promised offspring of Abraham offers Himself as the ultimate blood sacrifice on Calvary, it opens the door for all of Abraham's subsequent offspring to begin cashing in on their inheritance and immediately receive the blessings and the promises that were extended to Abraham. If you are in Christ, you can start cashing in on your inheritance right now!

Paul has already noted how all who are of faith are sons of Abraham, and in Chapter 3:29 he will say "if you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." Being recipients of the inheritance promise to Abraham and his primary offspring, who is Christ, is massively important to us and it has incalculable value to us. It may seem when we read verse 16 that Paul is just splitting hairs or he is being very fussy about languages. He makes this huge distinction between the *promises* being made to Abraham's offspring rather than uAbraham's offspring. The Bible is accurate, the Bible is precise, it is unerring, and Paul knows his Scripture very, very well. Paul believes in the authority of Scripture. He believes the fact that the Bible is the revealed written Word of God. Paul knows that the Holy Spirit inspires the human authors of Scriptures and the Spirit works through their distinct personalities and their vocabularies to cause them to choose the exact words that need to be written down in order for God to communicate his message clearly and accurately to humans.

Concerning Abraham, Paul knows precisely what it says in Genesis. Genesis 12:7, "to your offspring I will give this land." Genesis 13:15, "all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever." Genesis 24:7, "to your offspring I will give this land." Like the other inspired authors of the New Testament, Paul pays careful attention to the grammar and to the context of the Old Testament examples that he quotes. Paul is fully aware that the word offspring is what is known as a collective noun, a collective noun, or to collect a group of similar things under one heading. I might say, for instance, Americans are a people who come from many different ethnic backgrounds. When I use the word *people* in that sentence, you know that I am not talking about one person. I'm talking about a whole group of people, Americans. In the same way the word offspring is a collective noun. Offspring can refer to a single individual or it can refer to a group of individuals or it can refer to both. If you happen to have fourteen great-grandchildren with numbers fifteen and sixteen coming on the way, as one of you mentioned to me last Sunday when you left church, you might refer to them all at once and say "I have many offspring" or "I just spent the weekend with my great-grandkids and I must say my offspring are a lively bunch." You might also speak of one of them and say, "One of my offspring made the honor roll." Paul knows that the word offspring can work both ways and, depending on the context in which it is used, it can either signify one particular offspring or many offspring that taken together form one group.

In fact as I read to you a moment ago in verse 29 of this very same chapter, Paul uses the word offspring to refer to a group of people when he writes, "If you are Christ's then you are Abraham's offspring and heirs according to the promise." You may be saying now, "Whoa, Paul, what are you trying to do, confuse me?" Well no, not at all. Rather than offering us a grammar lesson, rather than trying to make an important theological point that rests on the addition of a single letter "s" to the end of a word, Paul wants us to

understand exactly what the Old Testament means when it speaks of Abraham's offspring. The promise given to Abraham and extended to his offspring is first transmitted to his son Isaac. Genesis 21:12: "For through Isaac shall your offspring be named." Centuries later God shows how his promises moving forwards towards its final fulfillment when God tells David he will give him a descendant who will build a house for God's name. Second Samuel 7:12: "When your days are fulfilled and you lay down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you who shall come from your body and I will establish his kingdom. I will be to him a father and he shall be to me a son." Ultimately the New Testament opens in Matthew 1:1, where we see all this, how its been heading finally, "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the Son, the seed, the offspring of Abraham."

Ultimately, in order to extend the promise God makes to Abraham to encompass all of God's children, the promise must first filter through one specific individual who is Abraham's true offspring and that is Jesus Christ. The covenant God makes with Abraham is all about Jesus Christ. The promise that God makes with Abraham looks forward to Christ. What God promised to Abraham is the good news about Jesus Christ and how through his sacrifice on Calvary all the nations of the earth will be blessed through Christ. The covenant promise that Abraham receives finds its final fulfillment in Christ.

When we believe in and when we belong to Christ, we're united with Christ and what is Christ's becomes ours. The promise to Abraham was Christ, and if we are in Christ then the same promise belongs to us. You do not need to be biologically related to Abraham to claim Abraham's inheritance. Our family resemblance with Abraham is spiritual not physical. All you need is faith in Jesus Christ and you can start cashing in on your promised inheritance right now. In Christ you have an inheritance that contains innumerable benefits and every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. We have the blessing of being able to know and understand and commune with God through his Word. We have the blessing of being a branch that abides in the vine that is Christ and having the life giving sap of Christ flowing into us. We have the blessing of knowing the freedom and the fulfillment that comes from the Holy Spirit's work within us as He continues to reveal Christ to us and as He ministers Christ's grace to us and causes us to walk with the Lord in joyful obedience. We have a blessing of a fountain of living waters springing up inside of us. We have the blessing of being able to bear fruit for God, fruit that will last. When we leave this life we look forward to the blessing and the joy of an eternity spent in God's presence and the privilege of being glorified together with all who are part of the living body and bride of Christ. That's your inheritance if you're in Christ and that's for here today right now. The word and promise that is spoken of here is a word that's going to dominate the whole concluding section of Galatians 3. Paul will use this one word promise eight times within the span of fifteen verses and Paul is so adamant that we understand the great distinction that is between the promise and between the Law and understand the fact that God gives his people his promise first and his Law sometime later, 430 years later to be exact. The promise is all about what God will do, whereas the Law is about what we must do.

In his commentary on Galatians, Philip Racon notes, when God makes promises to Abraham, he consistently says "I will, I will, I will," and when God gives the Law to Moses God says, "Thou shalt, thou shalt, thou shalt." The Law and the promise operate in two entirely different ways. The promise highlights God's plan and God's grace and God's initiative. Whereas the Law focuses on our duty and our works and our responsibility. The promise has only to be believed. The Law has to be obeyed. And Racon is quick to point out

that when he says the promise has to be believed, we do not mean a belief that's merely a head nod or an a mental assent, no, but a firm trusting and a grasp of God, that all that He has promised in Christ will come to pass.

God's promise takes precedence over God's Law because the promise comes first in time. Contrary to the false teaching that the Galatians are hearing, the Law comes secondary in the unfolding history of redemption. The Law does not supersede the promise. The Law does not supplement the promise. The Law is not an addendum to the promise. No, like a will that has already gone through probate, God's promise to Abraham is irrevocable. It cannot be invalidated. It cannot be replaced. It cannot be added to. It cannot be amended. As far as justification is concerned, the Law does nothing to change the terms of God's promise. Think about it, if the Law was necessary for salvation, it came along way too late to do Abraham any good. When God gives Moses the Law, Abraham has been dead for centuries. Abraham's salvation was not based on anything that Abraham did. God's promise to Abraham did not establish any legal requirements that Abraham had to satisfy. Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. God's promise came to Abraham in the same way that you or I might receive an inheritance for free, no strings attached, no if, ands, or buts, entirely the matter of a promise that is received by faith.

Just let me be clear in spelling all of this out for us so precisely. Paul is not saying that the Law has no relevance to the life of the Christian, or that the Law no longer matters, or the Law has no role in the life of the Christian. No, no, Paul wasn't saying that at all, and he will make that clear as he writes on. In fact he will let us know that the very reason that Christ sets us free from the Law of sin and death is so that we can have the supernatural ability that we need in order to pursue the righteous requirements of the Law with joyful obedience instead of dutiful drudgery. How freeing it is to know that with respect to salvation God deals with us according to his promise not according to Law. Our salvation in Christ does not rest on a law that we inevitably break. No, salvation rests on a promise that God cannot break. God deals with us according to his promises, not according to our works. My relationship with God rests entirely on believing his gracious promise of giving me an inheritance in Christ. As is true of anyone who seeks to provide an inheritance, God can do whatever He wants when He sets his terms. He can do whatever He wants with the spiritual blessings that He has to hand out and to offer. Thank God that the inheritance He offers to those who belong to Him through faith in Christ includes the forgiveness of sins and fellowship with Christ and life in the Spirit and the free gift of eternal life with Him in heaven. Thank God that God chooses to give his inheritance away. Verse 18. God gave it to Abraham by a promise and what God gave Abraham in the past, He continues to give us in the present. Salvation is truly a gift that keeps on giving. When we come to God in faith as Abraham did, no matter what we have done, our sins are covered by the covenant righteousness of Christ. Our standing with God does not fluctuate up and down like the stock market and on a daily basis. It's not going up and down based on the inconsistency of our obedience. No, we are loved with an unconditional, infinite love on the basis of the promise that God made to Abraham millennia ago. Because of God's love made alive in us, we are enabled to act on our faith and to live out our faith like the true heirs of God that we have become through our inheritance in Christ. So my friends, brothers and sisters, I encourage you to live in the light of the reality of this inheritance that is available to you every moment of every day. Don't neglect any of the great riches that Christ has put at your disposal and given to you.

A Beggar Named Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) by "Pastor Hudson"

Luke, the 16th Chapter, that deals with an account of the rich man Lazarus. There is a great deal of meaning in this that is particularly necessary for us as Christians and as non-Christians to consider. In the past we've spoken at some length on the subject of an eternal perspective. Now it's one thing to talk about that and to reason it, and take those words of Paul where he says to all believers, and not only to believers but also to all of the sons and daughters of Adam, where he calls upon them, "Set your affections upon those things that are above where Christ is, and not upon the things that are upon the earth." That is a call of all, and yet as the world is, that is the last thing, the inclination of the soul in its entirety as it were, to grovel in this world in the little season between the time that it is born and the time that we are to die. We live our lives largely under the sun, seeking here what enjoyments, what pleasures, what purpose we have amid all that is failing. Change and decay all before us we see all around us lies. And yet for all of this, the change, the decays, the risings, the fallings, the births, the dyings, for most of us there comes little change in the everyday course of life. It was a consideration of things that are eternal that are stressed so much in Scripture and laid open before us in this passage, of the rich man and Lazarus, that's causing thinking people to think. The question, how then, if this is what lies before me, how then shall I live? I do understand that it is not just how I should go through the motions of being a Christian. What are the things that I should do that people may recognize by my conduct and by my language simply that I am a Christian? You remember what Jesus said, and it summarizes the weight of his testimony of Scripture, "not only the things that I do, but as a man thinks within his mind." As we think, what are our thoughts, what are our inward reflections? What are the lusts of the mind and the lusts of the flesh, the things that we long for here?

I think these are some of the matters that are touched upon not as a story but as an account of reality of this rich man and poor Lazarus. I'd like this week to spend just a little bit of time going over this in a very general way to talk about a few things more generally. We'll speak but only briefly on these points and Lord willing next week we'll spend some time on this, this man that has a name Lazarus, a poor beggar, a poor suffering beggar. That when he died, what was the eternity that lay before him? And the week following that, Lord willing, we'd like to spend some time on this other man, the rich man, and you'll notice that this rich man is nameless. Lazarus was known of the Lord. The rich man was also known, but goes into the eternal worlds nameless, but we want to talk about the end of these men because it has a direct bearing upon each and every one of us. Eternity lies before each of us. A song that we have often sung, "Brethren, We Have Met to Worship," remember one of the phrases in that is, and it's true of each of us: "Deathbeds are coming for each of us." There is no doubt, there is no question, of the when and the how are known only to God, with the certainty of it to us is this: they come and they are coming. There is a time even now appointed of God when it will come.

If you would take your Bibles, and as I mentioned turn to Luke 16, we'd like to just begin the overview. And we read, "That it came to pass that the beggar died and was carried of angels into Abraham's bosom." He died and what became of the poor man, carried into Abraham's bosom that, just to stop for a moment is generally understood as a Hebraism. It simply means he was carried into the heavenly state where Abraham the father of all the faithful were gathered and God is a father of all. Gathered into the

heavenlies, gathered into the presence of God. And there it seems he's lost in wonder, love, and grace, as from the state of hell the rich man looks up and sees him resting in the eternal glory in the bosom of Abraham, heaven, what others could not see at that instant of death for poor Lazarus.

He was but a beggar. There was nothing of this man that humanly speaking to any of those who were around was a matter of any worth whatsoever. He was but a beggar and such a beggar that he had to be carried to the place where he would lie there on the steps and cry and beg for even just a few crumbs that would fall from the rich man's table. A man that lay there so sick and in so much pain that dogs would come, and dogs would lick his sores, and he was full of sores and full of sickness and full of pain. To look at him one would never think that in a moment when this poor beggar died on the rich man's steps, that when the last sigh in this world was breathed and the last pulse was felt, that he would open his eyes to an eternal world and there to greet him, standing as if they were waiting for him, his angels. Bright and shining angels, around this poor man's deathbed. And they took him. And it would seem with a greatness and a gladness they bore him up and they carried him into the glory. We'll speak, Lord willing, more on that next week. But as far as he was concerned they were little of a concern. He was dead. Little did they know, that in that passing, in the moment of a twinkling of an eye, what a great transition had occurred. When this life was exchanged for eternity.

But the same thing also with a rich man. He goes on to say that the rich man died and very simply put, he was buried. And when he died, what was it about him? We know so little. How did he die? What was his deathbed like? Was he a man that, as in the book of Psalms, when Asaph said that there were those that when they die it's as if nothing troubles them? And perhaps there are some here that when it comes to your time to die it will be as you have lived. Nothing spiritually or eternally has ever troubled you. In most cases, an individual that lives indifferent to the eternal world dies indifferent to it. And it appears as though this man may have been one of those. There is nothing recorded at all except that this man at the instant of his death, in a moment, was the last breath that was breathed, the last sigh, the last heartbeat in this world, as his eyes for the last moments scanned across all that he had and then closed and opened into another world and found himself in the midst not anticipating but in the very midst of the flames and the torment and the agony of those that die and go to Christ-less graves. But none of those that attended his deathbed in those moments would ever have assumed that this man, that this man that just passed from them, had entered into a world like that. None would have imagined.

And the solemn thing to remember of these events, and as generally held, that this is not a parable. This is Jesus reiterating an event of two men, historically, that these people around him knew. It's not a parable; it's not a story; it's an actuality. The difference is that here as men look upon this and wonder, Christ steps forward and draws aside the veil and the curtain of eternity that all of us, they know, that lies ahead of us. And to each and every one of us there is presented in this account as Jesus would have us consider and consider it deeply, because it impacts each of us. It will be in one or the other of these places that you and I not may, but we will, spend eternity. It's not a matter of doubt; it's not a matter of question; it's a matter of reality. Let the atheist say what he will. "There is no God. There is no life after." Let him say what he will, if the agnostic say what he will. And it may be that the rich man was a man just like that. But when the rich man, if he was but an atheist, opened his eyes in hell, he understood.

He understood that the terrible reality now that is descended upon him in a place from which he could not escape but the reality was now something not of thought but something now of experience. Some have made a comment one time that ten seconds in hell burn out all the unbelief that a man has ever had. The reality of it. But perhaps the rich man was just a good professing Jew that went to synagogue every Sabbath as many Christians go to church every Sunday. And perhaps he was the kind that sat in his purple robes and a place of honor where people looked up to him. Maybe he even taught a Sunday school, a Sabbath school class. We're not told. But we do understand what Jesus said in one place there would come many and these are the professed Christians, professed believers that have a great confidence within themselves, about themselves. Lord, Lord have we not done all these wonderful things? Why Lord, I preached, or I taught in Sunday school, or I helped to take care of things. And what does it say? In the moment of their death when they come and stand before God and the judgment, expecting a welcome, "Thou good and faithful servant," what they never considered until now, and now too late, "Depart from me you worker of iniquity, because I never knew you." I never knew you. There was little concern about spiritual matters. There was little concern about their soul. There was little inquiry into the great and all consuming question that each of us must answer, "What must I do to be saved?" And what do I do with the question? What do I do with it? And that's why Paul, Paul presses the point, "How then shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation that God has provided?" How shall we escape? That is a question that no angel in heaven can answer. That is a question that no demon in hell can answer. Because there is no escape.

The question is answered already. And the preliminaries prepare them to meet thy God. The account will go into in a couple of weeks where it says he cried to Father Abraham, "Have mercy upon me! And send Lazarus, send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger into water to cool my tongue for I am tormented in this flame." It was no longer a concept; it was a reality now. It was a reality. Who look to God, that he would think that he could have gone back would if it were for one day? Or as Queen Elizabeth put it on her own dying bed, "Oh, but for an inch of time but an inch of time!" But a time is now no more. Now is eternity.

You ask for proof of it. First of all, it lies within your very soul. That's how God made you. God has placed eternity in the heart. No matter how a man may vitiate his own soul to come to the place whether he would deny an afterlife, he comes to that only by vitiating it. He comes to that only by repressing what is inherent within him. No man is ever born this way. It's something that's sin and what we call "the hardening of the heart" that brings a man to make these things have little concern for him.

An example of this, I remember listening to an interview one time years ago with a man, he was a known illustrator for magazines, and he was an atheist, and a very proud atheist. He was also gay, and he was married. And in the beginning of the interview, they asked him all about his beliefs. "Have you renounced Christianity?" He gave his reason for this, for the simplistic stupidity of the people who believed in this. They asked him about his belief of an afterlife. He says, "There's nothing like that that exists. When we die, we simply cease to exist," he said with great, great emphasis. There is nothing after, nothing after. But then strangely they got to talking about his personal life. And about, as he called it, his love for his partner. And they began to question and apparently in that relationship they were very close and they kind of had grown old together. And then all of a sudden, the

atheist that denied spiritual matters at all and denied eternal life made this statement, "But I know I will see him again someday." Deep inside it shatters, it cannot be contained. Press it down, suppress it, an enmity against God. But we can never, and the man, the rich man cannot deny what now he experiences to be the reality.

Jesus teaches very clearly and very specifically there is a heaven, and there is a hell. And they are eternal, and there is no middle ground. There are no purgatories. There are no states of sleep where we simply sleep and come and exist no more. What they call annihilationism. And there are denominations such as Jehovah's Witnesses that teach that annihilationism. Jesus never taught that, and I think that this account is a revelation that Jesus brought to our minds, to us, each of us, as we read this, that we might weigh and consider ourselves, as this eternal veil is pulled to one side, and we see heaven and we see hell. The realities of it and then, "Lord which and where will I be? And where will I spend eternity?" Is dealing with reality as is Christ dealing with reality to press the importance of these matters upon the souls of most of us who take them with little interest?

Some people who dismiss the important aspects and the doctrines, they say, "Well it's a parable." It's a story like many other stories that you don't place a great deal of emphasis on the situation of it, that there's a moral to it. And there is. And the moral that is stressed, really rather simple, it's "Do good to your neighbor." There are sins of commission. There are sins of omission. This man died and went to hell because of sins of omission. So, the moral of the story is simply be good. Be good, do good. And it'll end well for you. It's not what this is talking about. Certainly, that is involved. But that is not the highlight of this. This deals with consequences of how we have lived.

It's evident that as far as this man was concerned, there is nothing in the account that says that the rich man was wicked. Did you notice that? There's nothing in there. As we said earlier, he may have been a fine upstanding man. So far as society was concerned and what the church people said about him. No doubt he paid great sums of money that went into the church coffers. Perhaps he was a devout Jew of his time. The one thing that's striking (and we'll deal with it later) that there's nothing said that this man who would go into hell was a wicked man, a murderer, a liar, a killer, a thief, or an adulterer. Nothing like that is stated about him.

Jesus intentionally left out that issue, silent. In the Day of Judgment all of this that is written in the book of your life, all will then be brought out. All the deeds that we've done and that he has done, all the thoughts that have gone on within the mind are all recorded. All the lusts of the mind and the lusts of the flesh are not something like birds that have flown away and like a breeze it will never return. They're all recorded. And one day as we stand before God as this man must stand before God, though nothing is said here, it is all written there. And in that day, we as he will stand before the judgment seat of God and there when the books are opened there lies the true biography of all. Not just what we have done but all that we have been. Nothing is said specifically that this was a wicked man. Nothing is said that he was not a, quote unquote, religious man. Like many of us who sit in our pews from Lord's Day to Lord's Day, we would say, "These are good Christians, good moral Christians. Look how they come to church, how they do what they do." This man may have been such a man as many of us would profess to be. God knows the heart; his and ours God knows. But he surrounded himself with a great deal of luxury and a great deal of ease whereas Lazarus, like so many of God's children, was a man that has struggled to survive, day by day. And as the days went on the struggle became deeper, the poverty deeper, the

pain that wracked his body more and more and more intense. It says of them both, it says that Lazarus died, and it says and the rich man died. That there is no escape for any of us as we said earlier from deathbeds or from the grave. There's a commonality in death. All men sin; all men must die. And there is no reprieve.

It also teaches that in the event of death, it is stated very clearly, when the soul passes from the body, it will be called the intermediate state. The state where it's disembodied the soul, the body will return to the dust from whence it came. And the soul, the immortal soul, the spiritual part of a man of his thoughts of his mind, of his feelings, of his memories, all that he is—now this does not cease to exist or go into a state of simple slumber or sleep or is annihilated. But in the intermediate state between the instant that a man dies and the time of the resurrection, in the intermediate state, he does exist. And that existence is made very clear. And it is either in a state of glory or in a state of torment, of heaven or of hell. And as we stated earlier there is no middle ground. And in that intermediate state the instant that a man dies, he is fully conscious of all that is going on around him. Not only of all that is going on around him, but all that is within him.

The rich man opened his eyes in hell. What does he see? In an instant all the luxury, all the clothing, the fine apparel, all the fine food, all that he had is gone, exchanged for this! In flames he said, "I am in torment." A man that fared so finely upon the best of foods now craves, craves deeply but a drop of water. That someone would come into that eternal world, to the place where he lay in torment and but dip a finger in water and just wet, moisten his tongue is all that he longed and prayed for. In the midst of the torment, I thirst, and I thirst conscious—conscious not only of the surroundings but conscious also of the great needs that he himself felt. And where also, as it was told him, as he no doubt would pray or ponder a way of escape. Truly there must be an end to this. Until the word came and informed him. There is no end. There's a great gulf that is fixed over which now you are here. You can never pass. And none will ever come to minister to you. All that you had and the season to be prepared to meet God and to stand in judgment was on that other side. Now you have come here. A great gulf is fixed. And there is no reprieve, and there is no leaving.

And those of you that have read the allegory, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, remember how when Dante came in his dream to this great opening and heard the cries and the groans and the screams reverberating, echoing, coming out of the pit of a terrible darkness? And he looked over the mouth of hell. And you remember what was deeply engraved over the entrance into the infernal regions: "Despair of hope all ye who enter here." There is no reprieve. There is no mitigation. "I choose not to believe it," you say, or "that's a hard saying." You have difficulties with it? Take it up with the One who with mercy pulls aside the veil and is forcing us in the reading of these passages. Any of us sitting here this hour, this particular time, could not go home and say that they have not been told, not what was said from this pulpit but was read to you from Scripture and from the very lips of Jesus. But you say "Give me proof, give me evidence."

That's exactly, you see, what the rich man was demanding Abraham. He said, "I understand that I am here. I understand that there's no escape for me from this place. Now I realize the folly and the waste of all that my life was. And now it has come to this." But he said, "But send someone to go back and tell my brothers and warn them. Warn them lest they come to this place where I am now. Send Lazarus, anyone." And what Abraham said to him is what Abraham says to us, that they trifle with these statements of Jesus and would

shrug them off as these are idle tales, not to be overly concerned about. When he asked to send someone, Abraham said to him, as God says to each of us, to each of us the same thing, "They have Moses, and they have the prophets. Let them hear them." And a slight paraphrase to us: We have, you have, Moses and the prophets and in addition the testimony of Jesus Christ that these things are true.

He goes on and again he pleads with Abraham, and he said, "Father Abraham, nay, no, no, not that." And so, the Scriptures were not themselves sufficient to persuade a man of the reality and the necessity of preparing. He says, no, he says. He said reading the Word, having it preached, having it taught like this will be of no consequence to them at all. They will never listen to it any more than perhaps there are those that are here that will never listen to this. He said, "They, like myself—I had it, and I would never listen to it. But I know. But send, but, Lord, send someone across, send someone that when they hear, they will change." And notice, it's reiterated again to the man as it is again reiterated to each of us, and he said unto him as he says unto us, "If they, if you, if I, if we do not hear Moses and the prophets, if we will not hear this, our condition spiritually is not only so dangerous but so determined that if one rose from the dead as a living proof and cried in their ears they would not believe." And they would go on, as he went on, all the days of their lives as many professed Christians will, all the days of their lives not intent on knowing eternity. To this I am hastening. But where? What will become of me? The tragedy is that it is of little concern to most. And because it is of so little concern to most of us, even as Christians, the question that Peter raises that necessarily comes from it. Take away the eternal aspect and the eternal destination that is determined by what we do in this life. Remove that and settle into a state of mere complacency and of indifference. It doesn't trouble me. It doesn't bother me. I don't want to hear about that. I have enough to concern myself with. Let it be. The question then that Peter raises, "How then shall you live?" How then shall you live?

And then you go over to the book of Revelation when it said there, there at the very end, when the great white throne of judgment is set up, and the sea gives up its dead and the graves yield up their dead, great and small, none excluded, no place to hide, but all must come. And there in the presence of all the holy angels, the Book of Life is opened. And there what will be that you will be judged by? All of our deeds. And what will we do? What will become of my poor soul? Just as in the days when Noah preached, and he preached, and he preached in his own day. He's called a preacher of righteousness. He preached in no doubt the sum and substance of knowing that God had said a great judgment would befall. A deluge would come. And no doubt the substance of his preaching was knowing the end and what it would be. "Flee! Come! A message! Turn, turn!" As it comes to us as it is written in Scripture, as I live sayeth the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked would turn from their ways, would turn and would come. And then he asked the question and no doubt the same question that Noah would've cried for 120 years to that generation, "Why will ye die?" And the question comes then to us in the same way. These words of Scripture are written to inform us. But then we dismiss them. We have little concern for them. As though all will be well, when all is not well and the question then that resonates through the ages and to all. Why? Why will ye die?

There's a place in the Scripture where it says, Psalm 139, it speaks about, "Though I ascend up to heaven, thou art there." Now the question sometimes comes, to kind of diffuse the intensity of what we're trying to talk about, they say, "Well, doesn't the Bible say, at death we will all die, that at death the body returns to the dust and the spirit returns to God

who gave it?" As though it were like a universalism. We will go to be with God, and all will be well. Read Scriptures. Read the Scriptures. The dreadful and fatal delusion of that kind of thinking will not end well. Because the psalmist says in 139, and this is what could have been said about Lazarus, "Though I ascend up to heaven, thou art there." But then he makes a statement, "But if I make my bed in hell, thou art there." There is no escape from God. But you'll notice the emphasis is that God not simply arbitrarily casts people into hell. He makes the statement, it is if I in this life, knowing the difference and knowing what I must do and I will not do it, I choose to live in sin. I choose to live in defiance. I choose the pleasures of sin. I choose all of this and yet not realizing that in all of this I am heaping up for myself the wrath against the day of wrath that will come. And I am presently, with each indulgence of sin, with each rising of indifference and going on brazenly against what I know to be right, what God commands me and warns me against. But I will pursue it anyway. Then when the psalmist says I would then be doing is I am even now in all of this, I am making my bed. I am making my bed in hell. You remember the old saying "You make your bed; you lie in it." Forever and forever, and ever, without end.

We could spend a great deal of time talking about the intermediate state, go into the Scriptures, that demonstrate this very clearly. My thought was that we don't need to go any further at this moment to delve into this account more than simply here. What greater apologetic do we have for the existence of life after death? What greater apologetic do we need? That in the instant that a man or a woman or a young person's death, that there is either a heaven or there is either hell. There is none that could speak more to this faithfully and truly than the one who gave this account, which is Christ Himself. You have, I have, we have Moses and the prophets and the Gospels. We have this and if you or I or as a church we will not listen to this, then the language of Scripture is this, "Thou has destroyed thyself." Not only is it here but in the language of Christ. Not only is it here, it is clear.

And if you would turn in closing to Deuteronomy, Chapter 30. Moses had some words beginning with verse 15: "In that I commanded thee this day that thou (in speaking to us also) that I have commanded this day as a Scripture commands us and God commands us to love the Lord thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his commandments and his statutes and his judgments, that thou mayest live and multiply and the Lord thy God will bless thee in the land where thou goest to possess." But many of us like to hang on that and think this is our, this is our land, this is my land. But is it? Verse 17: "But if thine heart turn away so that thou wilt not hear,"—you may sit you may listen to the words but not to hear as unto life. "But if thine heart turn away that thou will not hear but should be drawn away and worship other gods." And those other gods are not necessarily stones and sticks and bugs and beetles, but the love of this world. The love of this present world is at enmity with God. Those that love this world have set themselves as enemies against God. Draw away after the gods and you begin to serve them. He says "I denounce unto you this day," as he would say to each of us not at some future time but this very day, this is what we will persist in. Understand what the end of it will be. "I denounce unto you this day that ye shall surely perish. And that ye shall not prolong your days in the land where thou pass over the Jordan to go in to possess it as you thought. You will never cross into that heavenly land." And furthermore he says, as to the veracity of it, "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life," and set before all of us, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing." And then he says this: "Choose life." It's as though the pleading, choose life. Again how it resonates with later one of the prophets as we quoted

before, this is what heaven and earth bears record, that if you will not obey, you will not love me, you will not serve me, heaven and earth bear record of this that you will be destroyed. And then he says I cannot break, I cannot break that law of justice. But he says choose life. And to each of us he says choose life. And the language of the prophet that we quoted earlier: "As I live sayeth the Lord God to each of us as I live, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but that the wicked would turn from his evil ways." Turn ye! Turn ye! For why, why will he die, oh House of Israel? Why? Turn and live. If you do not turn you must die. He says, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing. Therefore, choose life that both thou and thy seed may live."

We talk about a lost generation of our young people. We see the foolishness in the insipid, sometimes blatant, blasphemous stupidity that many of our children and our churches are being raised with. You remember when in the book of Ecclesiastes at the close of the book, Solomon for all of his great foolishness, sat down and he would write a letter in Ecclesiastes to his son. And notice what is said to his son. He addresses his son. He addresses youth particularly. He doesn't say, well when you grow up and you can think and reason these things through, but right now as a child, you know, have fun. You know, come and have fun at church. Let's go and let's party and we'll have a few devotionals sprinkled in there. He was the one that said, "Train up a child in the way that they'll go, and he'll not depart from it when he is older." When do we begin to seek, to instill, within the hearts and the minds not only older people but younger people. There are many older people that stand this very hour on the brink of exchange of worlds that are not prepared and have given no thought at all as to what will become of their souls? But he doesn't look simply to the end of life, but he looks to the beginning, and he says to the youth, he says to them, "And further by these, my son, be admonished the making of many books there is no end, and the study is weary to the flesh." Simply put, all of your reading, all of your studying, all of your endeavors to improve yourselves in this life, if that's all that it is, it is nothing but weariness to the body, and does nothing, nothing to prepare you for the world that is to come. But he stands back, now he stands back, and said I had done all of that, and the conclusion that I have come to is this: "Fear God and keep his commandments for this is the whole duty of man." That young people need to hear. Not inadvertently but personally. It is your whole duty to fear God. It is your whole duty in this life to keep his commandments and then to emphasize this. And he doesn't back away from it. Hard as it is, painful though it may be to hear, he says this for youth and for all of us and to those on the brink of exchanging worlds he says, for God shall bring every work into judgment with every secret thing whether it be good or whether it be evil. God shall bring every work that you and I have done. Shall bring it, every secret thing whether good or whether evil will come with us before the judgment. I've used the solemn words I lay before you, he says, this day, from this word, from the lips of Christ, life and death.

The question then, it should, it would seem versed from our souls knowing this: then Lord what must I do to be saved? And the answer so succinctly comes to the burdened soul convicted that his sins and his misery are very great, and that bearing the burden of his sins and misery he would sink down forever into eternal ruin. The answer then comes to him: believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved. Believe, and thou shalt be saved.

Peace (Galatians 5:16-26) by "Pastor Isaac"

One of the most positive words in the English language is the word *peace*. But there is a Hebrew word for peace which is even more positive, *shalom*. *Shalom* refers to wholeness or soundness that brings delight. Where there is *shalom*, everyone is flourishing and in Scripture there are 3 different dimensions of *shalom*. There is *shalom* between God and us, a wholeness in relationship with God that comes through Jesus. There is *shalom* between us and other people, in which there is a wholeness that he brings in our relationships. There is *shalom* in our heart, where he brings a kind of wholeness in our attitudes and in our thoughts and our emotions and that is desperately needed because we live in a world that is fallen. It's sinful. It's broken. God can be experienced as distant; relationships can be fractured; our hearts can have a lot of turmoil and distress. But the message of the gospel, which is the good news, is that through Jesus Christ we experience *shalom* and we can experience that in all three levels and Jesus himself is called in Scripture the "Prince of Peace." The Prince of *Shalom*.

Now for the last month, [another preacher] and I have been on a sermon series that will go into September on the theme of the fruit of the Spirit, and today the fruit of the Spirit that we are going to be looking at is peace. And the passage that is the basis for this is Galatians, Chapter 5 that talks about a conflict, a conflict that takes place within the heart of every believer. And so I am going to read some verses from Galatians, Chapter 5. "So I say, live by the Spirit and you will not gratify the sinful nature. For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other that you do not do what you want. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law."

Now before we look at what it means to have peace in our daily life, we need to begin with a more crucial issue, and that is having peace with God. The reason that's very crucial is because God is holy. When Isaiah had a vision of God on his throne and the seraphs were saying "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty," at that moment, more powerfully than he had ever experienced before, he saw the incredible contrast between God as holy and he says, "Woe is me, I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips." And so there is this reality as God tells us later in Isaiah, "Your iniquities have separated between you and your God. Your sins have hidden his face from you so that he will not hear." Left to us, there is no *shalom* between us and God. Left to us, there is no relationship between us and God whereby we experience what flourishes. There is no peace between us and God, left to ourselves. Because God's holiness requires that where there is offense and violation of his goodness and greatness and holiness, there are consequences and just punishment.

But in the love of God, He met the need of his holiness by punishing his Son, the Lord Jesus, in our place. And what we read in that extraordinary chapter in Isaiah 53—he, referring to Jesus, "was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon Him and by his wounds we are healed." And when we come to the New Testament, the Apostle Paul says in Romans, "Since we have been justified," which means we have been forgiven and accepted, "we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." And so, what I'm working from here is that either everyone here or everyone hearing me either already has peace with God or I encourage you as soon as possible to trust in Christ so that you do have peace

with God. And if we have peace with God, according to Scriptures, just as you receive Christ Jesus as Lord so continue to live in Him.

So how do we receive Christ? How do we experience peace with God? While we have been going our own way, in our own sin and we stopped and we turned around and that's called repentance and we turn toward Him and we trusted in Christ. And so Scripture says, "as you received Him." How did you do it? Very simple, you turned from sin and you turned toward trust in Christ. That basic pattern—we're to continue to live in that pattern and that is what we are trying to emphasize each week as we look at this.

And so a theme that I brought up several times before and we are going to look at again is once we have made that most important decision, which is to in this case have peace with God, God calls us to develop two ongoing habit patterns that we are to choose many times every week. These habit patterns are found in Ephesians chapter 4 and the first is a simple statement: "Put off your old self which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires." Though our hearts have been changed and he's given us a new desire and ability to do good in our own heart, he has not perfected any of us. Not in this lifetime, and so there is still the old self and that old self had sinful desires in our thoughts and in our words and in our deeds. And those sinful desires are corrupting us and unless we deal with those on an ongoing basis they will limit our ability to become like Christ. And so we are called to put off the old self. Because coming up from within our hearts every week are different things that are offensive to God. And God says as they come up and as my Spirit shows it to you, what I want you to do is hear what he is saying and then repent. Turn from that. Put off that aspect of your old self. That will happen every single week on a lot of different kind of issues whatever the Spirit of God convicts us of. So that is one part of an ongoing habit pattern of regular repentance.

But the other half is put on the new self, created to be like God in righteousness and the true righteousness and holiness. And so the Lord says, "I give in you a new heart, I am going to continue developing and strengthening your heart, the attitudes, the desires, the words that come out of your mouth, the actions that you have. I am going to keep working on that and to make sure I accomplish. I have given my Holy Spirit to live within you and day by day, week by week, month by month, he is at work shaping your heart, moving you baby steps at a time, mostly, to becoming more and more like Jesus Christ." Because his goal is to transform us, make us into the image of Christ. So there is that sense in which putting those two together, our prayer many times every week is, "Dear Father, make me more like Jesus." That is what it is. As I tried to show before, those two fit together and I have used the simple image of a pair of scissors. Just a blade with a handle by itself isn't enough. Just another blade with a handle by itself isn't enough but if they are joined together, you can actually carry out the goal. And the goal is to make us like Christ. So we put off the old self, we put on the new self, we do that throughout each week on many different things, whatever God brings to our heart and mind. That is what God has for all of us.

Now the fruit of the Spirit and there is nine that are mentioned. That is not an exhaustive list, but it is a wonderful list. The nine is because God knows in order to move you toward Christlikeness you need his work in each of these areas. Today the issue is peace. So here is the question, why do we need peace as a fruit of the Spirit? Because the sin in our heart has damaged or destroyed our ability to have peace. Let's think about that for a minute. All of us will end up being hurt by others. All of us will end up being wounded. All

of us will end up being sinned against by other people. Sometimes it doesn't seem that big. Sometimes it is massive. And because of our sinful nature, the response to the hurts and the wounds and the wrongs of life is a destructive anger called bitterness or resentment.

Let's think for a few minutes about the nature of anger. Some people when they think about anger only think about the emotional dimension, and that's very important, but that is just one dimension of anger. I think biblically anger is a moral response, that when we make a judgment that something is wrong. Moral issues deal with what should be or should not be. And when we think things should be this way but they're not, we are angry. And when we think things should not be this way but they are, we are angry. And our anger is a way of saying, "To me, what I am dealing with right now, there is something here that is wrong." And if you are not sure about that, let me just show you the other side. No one, no one ever says, "Things are just the way they should be and, boy, does that make me mad!" We are never mad when things are the way they should be. We are glad because they should be this way or they should not be that way. And anger itself comes in a variety of forms or different levels of intensity. Let's put it that way. Sometimes our anger is mild. We are annoyed. We are irritated. Sometimes our anger is moderate. We are upset or frustrated. Sometimes our anger is intense. We are enraged. We are furious! But no matter where it is on that continuum, our anger is always saying the same thing. "In my eyes, something is wrong." What about God's eyes? Well, God tells us that it is possible for us to have righteous anger. Scripture says, "Be angry and don't sin." I would say from personal experience, as an individual and as a pastor, righteous anger is possible, but it's rare. At least all the way through, it is rare. For the most part our anger is some kind of a combination where there is righteous elements in our anger and there becomes sinful elements and it's a combination between the two of them. But when it comes to the anger that is thoroughly sinful, that is bitterness and that is resentment. And we are always to keep in mind God's warning in James, Chapter 1, man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires.

And to help us understand anger a little bit better, I have two pictures of destructive anger. One of them is what I call the robe of darkness. Somebody hurts us. Somebody wounds us. That changes the way we think about them. That changes the way we see them. And what we end up doing in our mind and imagination is we now clothe that person in a robe of darkness. It's not just another human being but, "You are a person that hurt me! You wronged me deeply. I am wounded because of you and now whenever I mentally see you or physically see you, I see you wearing a robe of darkness." And that robe of darkness is so strong that if we don't deal with it, that it becomes the way in which we give them a sense of identity to us. "You are not just another man or woman or friend or neighbor or family member, you are a person who deeply wronged me and you are a person with a robe of darkness." And this robe of darkness not only affects the way we see them but if we don't deal with our own heart at that point, we will have conversations with other people about our opponent, about the person that wronged us. And as we talk to other people about that person, we end up letting them know how we see them, and we see them as a person wearing a robe of darkness. Unless they deal with how we're handling it, by the time we're done with that conversation, you know how they're going to look at our opponent? You know how they are going to see them the next time that they see them or think about them? Wearing a robe of darkness. Which is my issue but I now have pushed that onto somebody else. Now they are dealing with trying to look at that person in a proper way, rather than

the way in which I have given them. And that's why Scripture tells us that "Let no root of bitterness springing up cause trouble that can defile many." And it can defile not just us—it defiles other people. And so what this robe of darkness does is that it destroys *shalom* between us and that other person. There is no flourishing relationship possible between us and any person on whom we have clothed a robe of darkness. Relationships do not flourish. They die when there is a robe of darkness. I will come back to that picture in a few minutes, but that is one understanding of bitterness and resentment.

I got another understanding back in the late 1990's. I was involved with Peacemaker Ministries. I was one of their mentors and my mentor was a Lutheran laymen, Ted [last name], wonderful, wonderful man, and he was asked by his denomination, Lutheran Church of Missouri Center, which is a good denomination, to do peacemaker training for the leadership for their entire denomination nationwide. So he asked several of us, and it happened to include two Baptists and a Presbyterian as well as another Lutheran to work with him in training the Lutheran leadership of that denomination. And it was five-day training event at their international headquarters in St. Louis. So one of those days was half way through the week and Ted said, "[Name], would you give a presentation on the issue of resentment?" Which I did. And at the end of that there was a break and a man, a pastor I would say probably in his sixties came up to me and said, "You know I have discovered a very helpful way to explain what bitterness is like and what it does to people." And I said, "If there is something you want to share with me that's good. I'd be glad." And he said, "Okay, here is what resentment is like. We start with some poison. We pour the poison into a glass. We drink the poison, and then we wait for our opponent to die from it."

Scripture talks about the deceitfulness of sin and in our resentment we are carrying out our revenge against that person for the wrong that they have done. After all, it's their fault. It's their problem. "You're the one that did this to me." And as we are focused on the other person, we are poisoning our own soul. We'd like to blame them for the problem. They are responsible for what they did that was wrong. But they don't poison our souls. We are the only ones that can poison our souls. And so is there an answer to bitterness and resentment? Yes, there is. Very common biblical word, it's called "repentance." We are told in Ephesians, Chapter 4, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."

We have to recognize that bitterness and resentment is there and rather than continuing on and holding that, we need to turn from that and turn to the Lord for deliverance from that. And one of the things that happens when we repent—I'm going to go back to the robe of darkness—as long as we have that person clothed in the robe of darkness we never separate the person from the sin. We have clothed the person with the sin and that's how we see them. When we repent, we take the robe off in our imagination and we separate the robe from the person and we can honestly say of the wrong that was done against us, "I hate that. This was wrong, but the person who has wronged me was created in the image of God and I have the responsibility of loving and respecting them. I cannot treat them as if they are the robe of darkness." They are not the robe of darkness. They are a person who needs me to deal with my own part so that maybe at some point we can restore a relationship between us.

Think about Stephen for a minute. He was being stoned to death and this is what he prayed, "Lord, do not hold the sin against them." No one was repenting at that moment. They were all involved in killing him and yet he was not going to join with them in their

evil, and if he had lapsed into bitterness at that point, he would have joined in their evil. But he turned from evil and he prayed for God's forgiveness on the people that were doing the evil. Ultimately, that led to the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, who we know as the Apostle Paul. So as Scripture says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge." Whether that is taking revenge in our mind, taking revenge in our words, taking revenge in our actions. We think the issue is them. Well, they do have an issue to deal with, but if I am into revenge, the issue is here, the issue is in my heart. And we need to repent of that and not repay evil for evil.

So why do we need the fruit of the Spirit which is peace? That God might continually work at delivering us from the sinful nature still within us, from our capacity for bitterness and resentment, from the damage that we would do to other people and the damage that we do to ourselves, all dishonoring to God. And He said, "I am come as a deliverer." I think we might have even prayed for or sang about you as a deliverer. We need to be delivered from that. So that is one reason why we need the fruit of the Spirit which is peace. But then on the other question, why do we need peace as the fruit of the Spirit? Because we need to experience *shalom,* which is peace, between us and other people and we need to experience *shalom* within our own heart. And let's look at each of those.

As many of you know, I have been involved with Peacemaker Ministries and we deal with conflict. I have said many times that I really dislike conflict so it is in the wisdom and humor of God that he ever sent me, got me involved in Peacemaker Ministries, because you have to deal with conflict. But due to conflict, *shalom* between us and others will call for forgiveness. Let's think for a few minutes about forgiveness. The most important book in the world on forgiveness is the Bible. Let me start with two statements about forgiveness, according to Scripture. Forgiveness is canceling the debt and taking the loss ourselves. Every time we pray the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," we canceled the debt and God canceled our debt. We didn't have to pay it. He took the loss. Jesus experienced it. Another passage of Scripture talks about how forgiveness comes from an attitude of grace. It's showing grace to one who deserves judgment. Now I have heard people say, "Grace is undeserved favor." Actually, it's more intense than that. Grace is doing a favor to someone that justly deserves judgment. Sometimes we think that person doesn't deserve to be forgiven. You're absolutely right. How many times have we deserved to be forgiven? It's a matter of mercy, not a matter of justice. And so, we read in Ephesians 4, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving", that's the word *charis*, gracious, "graciously forgiving as in Christ, God forgave you." And how did he forgive us? Graciously favor people who deserve judgment. That's God's forgiveness toward us. That's the pattern for us.

And then God gives us three powerful pictures of forgiveness. And the first is that forgiveness is like moving away from something in the opposite direction forever. "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He has removed our transgressions from us." Opposite directions, forever. Why is that important for us? Because even after we prayed and we repented and sort of dealt with it, the thoughts come back and we say, "You really did enjoy those thoughts of bitterness so much. Why don't you just pull them up and embrace them again?" And God said, "No, no, no, you don't embrace them again. As far as the east is from the west, that's forgiveness."

Another picture that He gives us is that forgiveness is like washing out all the color of a garment with an indelible dye. Now you say, wait a minute, indelible means it can't be

washed out. Well, the Jewish people had an indelible dye. It was known as crimson. God took the indelible dye and this is the message that he gave them. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are as red as crimson, they shall be like wool." Oh God, you can't wash out crimson. "I can." God looks at our sin and it's indelible in the presence of a holy God who is also very merciful and loving. So we have to let that be washed out.

And the last one I want to look at is found in Micah, Chapter 7. Forgiveness is like burying something thirty-five thousand feet below the surface of the ocean. This is what we read. "You will again have compassion on us. You will tread our sins under foot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea." Thirty-five thousand feet, that is pretty well at the lowest point in the ocean, and God said, "This is how I look at your sins and this is what I give you. That you are to take that and put it into the depths of the sea." Now, you are going to be tempted at times to say, "Man, I'd really like to dwell upon that sin, that bitterness and resentment. I'd like to sort of relish that again. So maybe I'll put on some deep sea diving equipment and go down to the bottom and bring it up to the surface so I can enjoy it again." Don't go there. God says, "The depths of the sea, that's where I throw it. The depths of the sea, that's where you are to throw it. That is forgiveness."

Now, we live in a culture that has a variety of views of what forgiveness is. The best, to my understanding, look at this, especially for the last twenty-seven years is that there are two dimensions to forgiveness mentioned in Scripture. One is a forgiving attitude. I call this the vertical dimension of forgiveness. This is between me and God. What is God hearing about my heart to someone who has wronged me? What He needs to hear from me. I don't care where that person is, in terms of their attitude. Between me and God, God brings out, "I have forgiven you. You are to have an attitude of forgiveness," and let me know, God, that in my heart I have forgiven that person. That was behind Stephen praying, "Do not hold their sin against them." That was between him and God. No one was repenting. No one was feeling sorry about what they did. But between us and God. And we might think, "Well, I don't really know that I want to pray to have a forgiving attitude, because they haven't changed yet." God says, "No, I want you to follow my word. You are responsible for your own heart." If you have an unforgiving attitude, you are one hundred percent responsible for that. They are zero responsible for your unforgiving heart. "I call you, as a person that I have forgiven to forgive in your heart and pray that to me." You have to deal with your heart. You cannot blame your heart condition on anybody else. So that's the first part. We are all responsible for a forgiving attitude regardless of who the person is and what the situation is. We are not going to stand before God on the Day of Judgment and say, "You know God, this person and I could just never get to the point of forgiving them, God, because it was so bad." Now on the Day of Judgment, God's not going to say, "I understand, that's okay." No, he's going to say, "You are responsible. Why did you hold onto an unforgiving heart?" We need to deal with our unforgiving heart. That's the vertical dimension of forgiveness.

Then there is the horizontal dimension of forgiveness. That's toward the other person, what I call extending forgiveness. And this comes when the other person begins to acknowledge what they said or did that was really wrong or really hurtful. However they phrase it, they're sorry for it and they come to us and then we are to extend forgiveness to them. This is what the Lord Jesus said, "If your brother sins, rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him." The interesting thing is that the word rebuke. Rebuke him in the original

means to do it tentatively. Not start off dogmatically, because we believe that we've been wronged. Yup, but do we have infinite understanding of all that was going on in that situation in that person? No we don't. So we can say, "I really believe that when you said that or did that it was really hurtful to me. That is what it was like." We can tell them that and give them a chance to say if there is something more we don't know. "Did you realize what I was going through? Did you know the circumstances in that situation?" Sometimes after we hear from the person more about the situation than we knew, we stand back and say, "Oh, maybe, maybe I was too harsh. Maybe I overstepped the bounds." God allows us to say you can talk to them but if you've found that you've overstepped the bounds, pull back. But if they repent, if they honestly say, "I am sorry," then we are to forgive them. And that's the extended forgiveness horizontally. You might say, "Well, some people who have hurt me have never repented." I've experienced that myself. I am still waiting. It's been years. Will they ever acknowledge their wrong? I don't know whether they will ever acknowledge the wrong, but my heart has to be in a condition that I am ready the moment they should ever acknowledge wrong. I am ready to say, "I forgive you." I cannot let their failure to take responsibility to control my heart. Our heart always has to be in a place so that if that person ever comes to a point of owning up to it, we are ready to grant forgiveness, as the Lord Jesus says. So those are the two dimensions. The vertical dimension—our prayer of our heart before God regardless of the other person. And the horizontal—if they own up to what they have done and ask for forgiveness we are ready to extend that to them. Those are the two dimensions of forgiveness.

Based upon forgiveness is another element of *shalom,* and it's called reconciliation. And we need the Spirit of peace to be upon us so that not only do we forgive somebody but we move toward reconciliation. Now you say, what is reconciliation? Well, the man that I've studied under in peacemaking, Ken Sande, who wrote the book *The Peacemaker* and has two international organizations dealing with peace, had a one sentence definition that I found really helpful. "To be reconciled is to replace hostility and separation with peace and friendship." There's hostility and separation, and that needs to be replaced with peace and friendship. That's reconciliation. And then he taught me and so many others this important what he calls "the replacement principle." This is key to reconciliation. This goes beyond forgiveness. Reconciliation goes beyond forgiveness. It's seeking to bring *shalom* into the relationship again, seeking to restore. And here are the three things he brings Scripture to bear. If we are living negative memories and painful feelings and you have been deeply wounded and you have forgiven that person in your heart or even you have forgiven that person face to face, the temptation will be to have negative memories and painful feelings. What do we do with it? Well, if we are reliving it, we need to replace those negative memories. We need to replace those painful feelings with thinking about a person by applying Philippians 4:8. What does Philippians 4:8 tells us? Here's how I were to think about it: "Whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praise worthy." That's what we are to think about that person. This is not just theory to me. One person a number of years ago, I could not imagine them doing what they did. I was really, really struggling and then God called me to forgive them. And I was able to forgive them but then he was not satisfied with that, and he said, "What are the positive things in that person's life that you know?" And my initial response was, "There aren't any." The Spirit of God was not satisfied with that answer, kept bringing it back to Philippians 4:8. What are the good things in that person's life? Well, finally I acknowledged one good thing. God said,

"And?" I came up with the second good thing. "And?" I came up with a third good thing in their life. At that point I think God had felt he had taken me far enough down the road to realize that I did not have a heart ready to reconcile. But we need to move toward reconciliation.

Another thing is that if we begin to speak about them to others in a negative way, and that temptation is there, replace that by applying the Scriptures in 1 Peter, Chapter 3:8-11 that says, "Be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate, and speak blessing." Blessing is speaking well about that person. So we have to be able to not just forgive the past. We have to move into the future with replacing the negative with the positive.

And the third thing he says is we avoid doing good to that person. Replace this by applying 1 John 3:18 that says, "We don't love just in words but in actions." So find something specific, practical, really helpful, and do it to the person that you had that conflict with and you will experience the *shalom* of not just forgiveness but the *shalom* of reconciliation. Do good to that person and it will change your heart. And so we need the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit of peace, to help us when we are dealing with others and to be able to have *shalom* between us and others.

And the last thing I want to look at is: all of us know what it is like to have inner turmoil and it's certainly mentioned many times in Scripture. Jeremiah, in Lamentations, said, "See, Lord, how distressed I am. I am in torment within and in my heart I am disturbed." He is looking at the city of Jerusalem that has been destroyed by the Babylonians because the peoples continued holding on to sin. And he is so distraught about what is going on. Or in Psalm 25, "The troubles of my heart have been multiplied. Free me from my anguish. Look upon my affliction and my distress and take away my sin." All of us can have inner turmoil for any one of a number of reasons. Maybe there is someone who makes us angry and we're all stirred up with that. Maybe it's a situation where we are worrying about our circumstances. Maybe it is a situation where we are fearful of what might be coming down the road and we've got this turmoil inside us. When there is this inner turmoil we know the heart of the Lord Jesus for us because in John 14 he says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God. Trust also in me." God's answer is, "I want to see *shalom* within you, within your heart." And one of the most valued passages I use in my life, I use it in ministry all the time, I use it in prayer for myself and others, well-known passage, Philippians 4:6-7: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your request to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understand will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Now several decades ago, God very graciously took that passage and applied it to my life in a very specific way. And here is what He gave me. He said, "You know when you are worried about something, you tend to go over and over it." Not just once, in effect, I call it the whirlpool effect. What is a whirlpool? Well, whirlpool goes around. Right? But as it goes around, it picks up speed. And as it picks up speed, it takes us down. In God's early warning system he has saved me from many sinful responses, and if I had listened to him all the time, he would have saved me from all of them. But it's like if you go around something three times in short period of time, there is an issue in your heart. Deal with it ASAP. It's still on the level of temptation but you have to deal with it now. Because if you don't deal with it and it keeps going around and around, it's simply going to pick up speed, and it's going to take you down, and you're going to move into sin. And so God gives that early warning system. You're facing temptation. Scripture says, "Guard your heart with all

diligence for out of it flows the issue of life." And God is saying, "Guard your heart. Guard your heart. That's the third time around. Something's going on. Don't ignore it. Deal with it. Deal with it now." And God has protected me many times from going into levels of worry that I am quite capable of. And if I had always listened to him, he would have saved me from the times I did give in to worry. But nonetheless, he said, "I am able to give you peace that transcends understanding." And keep this in mind, according to Scripture the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace. If I am going around, my mind is not set on the Spirit. It's not life and peace. And so, any time you face, I face inner turmoil, whatever the cause, let the Spirit of God say, "Early warning system! Don't go there. Deal with it. Deal with it now. It's still in temptation level but if you don't deal with it, you're going to go into sin. But the fruit of the Spirit is peace, *shalom*. I want you to have *shalom*. On the very thing you are in turmoil with right now, yield yourself to me. And let me carry out one more time my saving work in your life in this way."

Lord, you know us inside out. You see the past, the present and the future. You know how every single one of us here need the fruit of the Spirit which is peace. We can look back on times where we can recognize that you have granted us peace and granted us a level of *shalom* and we are so thankful for that. But you see where we are at and you see where we are going and you see we will continually have the fruit of the Spirit which is peace. So come, Lord. Be gracious to us and pour out your *shalom* in our lives. In Jesus name, and all God's people said, amen.

The Work of Repentance (Hosea 10:12) by "Pastor Jalen"

The prophet Hosea is speaking truth on behalf of God. He is speaking forth the Word of God to the nation Israel whom God loves. These are the people that were raised up from a promise that he made to the patriarch Abram that a nation would be built, that the nation would be delivered into a promise land. That nation would be blessed and would be a source of great blessing and that's who Israel is, and God loves that. But for several centuries they have been away from him. They have been wandering. Every once in a while a good king would be raised up that would lead the people back into a focus on the Lord, but generally they were taken with the preoccupations of life on this world to include putting their trust in their worship in things other than the one, true living God. And if you remember from the opening chapters of Hosea, Hosea is asked to marry a woman of infidelity, a woman of immorality. It paints a picture of a God who entered into a covenant relationship with his people. It is like a marriage and when his people turn their back on God, it is as adultery. It gave us all that, like, of a sense of, like, icky. It is like not okay. God said, "Yeah, it's not okay." But then what we saw happen was we saw his portrait of this broken marriage and broken household. I mean there were kids born where Hosea was not the dad, and it is just a train wreck. We see Hosea being asked to act like God and to have relentless love that would pursue that errant wife, remember her name was Gomer, and to buy her back from the slave market that her sin put her in. We see that picture. That is the kind of love that he has for us—steadfast, never changes love. I am so glad He loves me. Are you glad He loves you? You bet we are, because without his love, we would be, to quote Jonathan Edwards, as a spider dangling over a fire. But He loves us, so He rescues, He redeems, He saves. So excited about that. As the prophet speaks in the life of Israel, he is warning them that they need to get right with God, and they actually need to do it with some measure of haste, because there is an empire to their east northeast that is going to come rolling over the place if they don't repent, the Assyrians. They don't repent. They don't turn from their sin. They don't get right for God. That is exactly what happens. But it is on the doorstep, and that's where Hosea is speaking. We are looking at a verse actually as a centerpiece of this whole prophecy, Hosea 10:12, and in that verse Hosea gives three simple commandments from God to his people that show us how to get right. [Scripture reading.]

There are three simple commandments here. Sow for yourselves righteousness. Reap steadfast love. Break up your fallow ground. I am so glad we live in northeast Connecticut because we actually get to see farmers farm and there are people in this room that farm and so we know what it looks like. If you are a big city folk you might not understand what this is all about, about sowing seeds and reaping a harvest and the idea of breaking up the fallow ground of a field that has not been cultivated for a while. But we get to see it, and Jesus in the Bible and Hosea in the Old Testament and Paul as he writes—over and over they use these agricultural examples because they are timeless. Hosea here is speaking to a people, God's people whom He loves, who have wandered away from Him and are not right with Him. He gives them these instructions.

Sow for yourself righteousness. What is righteousness? Righteousness has to do with the boundary. It is a dividing line between good and evil, between right and wrong, between righteousness and unrighteousness. There is a boundary line. Now if we were to decide what the boundary line is you would see things like the hostility right now in this

nation, Roe versus Wade, because you got two groups of people that have the boundary line in a different place about what is right and what is wrong. But a good thing, a wonderful thing that our living God is the singular arbiter of the difference between wrong and right. He puts down that boundary, and then he lives on the right side of that boundary and that makes Him righteous because he is always right. He always follows his rules about what is right and what is wrong and never participates in the wrong, and that by definition makes him righteous. That is what righteousness means. It also speaks to whether our relationships are right. Whether or not we are in right relationship with him because if we are in right relationship with Him then we are in that realm of the righteous, and if we are not, we are participating in and we are actually unrighteous—it's like a marker, a label, if we are on the wrong side of that boundary. What the prophet is saying here is what I want you guys to do, knowing Israel, that you are swimming in this slop of unrighteousness. I want you to start to plant seeds in your life. Sow for yourselves righteousness. You think about a farmer's field. I noticed this year as driving around the fields around here that are usually planted with corn. Mostly what you see is weeds growing, and then corn is starting to grow. If you want sweet corn, you need to plant sweet corn. If you want to see thistles, they will just start growing. So what God is saying here is if you want righteousness in your life plant seeds of righteousness in your life. What are the seeds of righteousness? How about understanding where the boundary is and putting the Word of God in your life? The parable of the sower—doesn't the Lord speak to the idea that a farmer goes out and sows seed? And then when his disciples say, this thick here [knocking on head], can you help us understand it? The seed is the Word of God. If you want to plant seeds of righteousness in your life, plant the Word of God. It also has to do with getting the weeds out so that what grows is righteousness, so it has to do with dealing with the sin in your life, we will get to that a little later.

The Word of God, 1 John 1:8,10. [Scripture reading.] I would offer to you that we have this Word—and given it is real in the eighth century B.C. of planting, of sowing righteousness in your lives as a healing—it is a cure for the unrighteousness in your lives. We ask ourselves, Lord, are you talking to me? The answer is of course He is, because we are God's people whom He loves and we have unrighteousness in our life. This is applicable. It's plant seeds of righteousness in your life like the Word of God there. Put Jesus in your life. Get closer to him. Reject the wickedness in your life that the field you are farming is growing all sweet corn, no weeds. We need to ask the question. It's basically this is all about being right with God. The way you get right with God is to join Him in his holiness and his righteousness. Of course we have to ask, am I really right with God? For the church that we participate here and the broader church in North America, maybe there is kind of another test. If you look at the field that is growing, is what is growing the fruit that we would want to see? Or are there patches of fruitlessness? Sow in your life righteousness.

Second commandment is to reap steadfast love. If I am sowing righteousness, wouldn't I expect that the crop would be righteousness? Why does the prophet here tell us to reap steadfast love? It sounds like I am planting one thing and expecting a result that is something different. Let's see if we can connect those. Steadfast love, it lines up with the Greek word that we think of as the love of God, *agape*, his unrelenting love that never diminishes. That for his people is always eleven and it doesn't matter what a knot you are at, it stays stuck at eleven. That's the love of God. Remember Gomer, and Hosea going to

buy her out of the slave market. Gomer treated her husband like it was a horror show, the way she treated her husband and her family, but his love could not be diminished. That's the love of God. His love cannot be diminished by our behavior. Is that cool or what? His steadfast love is remarkable and He loves us all. Now here is what is really interesting if He loves you and now He's talking about getting rid of the unrighteousness to plant righteousness. Is it so that He will love you more? No. It's so that you can receive the abundance of his love instead of the other side of his love. Hebrews 12:3-10 [Scripture reading.] God loves you. He sent his Son, Jesus, that you might be made righteous in his sight. That's how much He loves you. He has made it possible for you to live in the domain of righteousness. That's where the abundance of his blessing is. If you are living in unrighteousness, He still loves you but how does He behave towards you? Like a father disciplining a child. God does not have favorites. He loves you just as much when you are a knucklehead as when you are a good little holy person. So that is how parents should love their kids. God loves you so much. He does not want you to get stuck in unrighteousness because if you do, He's going to have to discipline you over and over again. What He wants you to do is jump the fence and enjoy the righteousness He has for you and do the work to plant the seeds of righteousness that you might harvest, what? The abundance of his steadfast love. This is so simple for Christians. It's like if you are not walking with the Lord, if you are doing other stuff, you are making your own life miserable through the agency of a God who loves you, disciplining you. If you do what God says is the right stuff, you will receive from the Lord the abundance of his blessings and you get to skip the time outs. Does that sound like an amazing and wonderful proposition? It is so simple what he's on offer here.

Now there is another angle on this when you ask the question how is it that you plant seeds of righteousness and what you reap is steadfast love? In the Old Testament the Hebrews were given the basic law of ten commandments and then a gazillion other laws related to case law and the cultic practices of this very special people. Then laid upon that were layers of rabbinic opinions about those laws that turn into a lot of rules for them to follow. When Jesus comes, he brings the grace and the deliverance that releases his people from bondage under that law. Because a bunch of rules are like shackles. So it releases them from that. Then when this whole topic of law comes up, you may remember that Jesus is asked what's the greatest commandment. Like if I was going to prioritize, I want to do the greatest one first because then just think about this righteousness/unrighteousness thing. God made it clear to his people obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings curses. So asking, what is the greatest commandment? Know what Jesus said, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, with all your strength. And the second is like unto it. Love your neighbor as yourself." Isn't it interesting, the connection between law and obedience and steadfast love? It's a couplet; they go together. John writes that the one who obeys me is the one who loves me and the one who loves me is the one who's going to obey me. They go together, this idea of righteousness and love. They are married, you can't separate them—the idea that we receive steadfast love and it is connected with righteousness.

Think about the seeds you are planting. There is one big seed that you need to plant in the garden of your life and it's the way God gives unrighteous people actual righteousness is to take their unrighteousness from them on the cross at Calvary. God's Word says that God made him who had no sin—that was Jesus because He's the perfect Son

of God with the perfect sinless life. He made him who had no sin to become sin—that's because our sin, past, present, future, and all the sin in the world all swirled in like are stuck to Him on the cross. And then He died for our sin and took it away and made it possible for our sin to be replaced with his righteousness. God made him who had no sin to become sin that we might become the righteousness of God. The big seed you want to plant like the acorn that's going to grow into an oak of righteousness is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. You cannot live in the domain of righteousness without being granted entry by his blood. So that's the most important thing. Then the idea of dealing with the unrighteousness you'll still have in your life—it's like we are stuck in this earth suit and we are surrounded by a world that, oh my goodness, if we listen to that, you will do all kinds of stuff that offends God. And you got an enemy that is trying to trick you into seeing and in doing things. So we know that we all traffic in sin. So now this is a different kind, if you will, of unrighteousness. It's like lived unrighteousness as opposed to forensic unrighteousness. Jesus removed your guilt and your shame and made you guilt-free before God. But we still have it going on, don't we? The fact that we still have it go on is one when you look at the fruit of the field that is the church, you see a lot less fruit than you would imagine that we might be able to see if everybody was walking in righteousness.

The third commandment: break up your fallow ground. The Hebrew text, it talked about how for the moment, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, later yields the peace full of the fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. It speaks about like God brings difficulty in your life and then moves you across the boundary from unrighteousness to righteousness. It said that is what the discipline is doing—making you more godly, making you more righteous, making you more holy. So it talks about—bears the fruit, the peaceful fruit of righteousness, to join God in his holiness—it's what he says here in Hebrews 12:10. Did you know that sharing in God's holiness is not like a takeaway? Some people that have sin in their lives that they kind of enjoy. They think to participate in God's holiness, I have to lose something. Thought experiment: when you die, where do you want to go? Heaven, right? What makes heaven? Heaven, there is no unrighteousness. What makes heaven? Heaven is [where] there is nobody that is doing otherwise than as God has planned. There is nobody, there are like no mean people; there are no immoral people; there are no adulterous people; there are no people that abuse people; there are no people that are selfish and exploit people. There are no boundaries of race or gender, the things that we look up and down at. Instead we live in purity and holiness and God is saying, you know what you can have, in so far as it is possible in flesh, that on earth. What you have to do is step across the boundary to participate in his holiness and move away from the unrighteousness.

The concept I am talking about is real simple. You can be the apparent favorite and receive all the blessings. You just make that choice. How easy is that? Simple does not equate with easy. In Hebrews 12:12-13, it talks about this peaceful fruit of righteousness. Sounds like when we are called to do the work, we are not up to it. That's because we're not. We're broken, we need help, and what else is it? The other thing that happens is, if you are living in a realm where you have some distance from God, what happens? Your relationship, just like a friend or a spouse, if you are not living in a relationship with them, spending time, the embers get cold. There's a cooling that happens. There's a distance that happens. The kind of things that happens in the lives of all of us—like in middle school, and you say something behind a friend's back. You just want to avoid them. Sin separates us

from God. We know he disapproves. Do we want to hang around with people that disapprove? If Dad loves you and he's going to disciplines you, what do you do when he comes home? You try to find a different room in the house than the one he's going to look for you. Sin separates us. You do that for a season and your heart slowly gets hard. You get a husk on your heart. Just like a field that hasn't been cultivated. Fallow means a field that has not been cultivated, fallow ground.

In the Old Testament God told his people, I want you to farm your land at a seven year cycle just like you live on a seven day cycle. Six years you farm it; one year you give it a Sabbath rest. In older agriculture, before lots of artificial fertilizer, etc., it was also practical. Give it a rest. Then the next year when you go to plow it, it has gone through a whole cycle of weeds growing and the rain beating it down, and if you live in a climate like ours the snow pounding down. The top layer of that ground that you want to plant seeds in and have the rain soak into has turned into concrete. That's what a fallow field is. It's difficult to break that up. What we are called to do is to ask ourselves, in my life is there a barrier like that? Like when a pastor says, you need to sow seeds of righteousness in your life and to do that, while it has to do with addressing sin, you basically say, "Not going there." Or when the pastor says that if you claim to not have sin in your life, you are deceived. You say, "No, no, I'm good." There is like a crust there, because the seed can't get into the ground because it is crusty. We are commanded to break up that ground. The crust is the product of your own sinfulness. So you have to address your sin.

When you come to worship do you prepare yourself to visit the living God? What does your preparation to come to church look like? How much of how you come to church has to do with your expectation of seeing other people in the church and what they are going to think of you? Would your preparation to come to church be different if your congregation was all blind? There are so many things in our lives that we need to address. Take time for this. What is the sin in my life? There are so many sins in the church of arrogance, pride, indifference, prayerlessness, lovelessness, that we just kind of live with and we don't even examine them in our own lives. Then there are obvious sins. As I look at a room with a lot of Christian men in here I know that statically three out of four of you are struggling with pornography. Unless it is this church, and of course not. And I know that people traffic in unwarranted fear. People traffic in idolatry. They let things in their lives that draw them away from the worship of Jesus because they decide those things are more important than the church and their love of Jesus. And it consumes our lives and it is going on in spades right now. With all of the turmoil in the world around us, it eats them up and it takes them away from Jesus. God has a word for something that you think is more important than He is, and it's idolatry. How often are you checking your 401K? Are you trusting in God to provide? Or trusting in, like I use, UBS? If you are not trusting Jesus, you're an idolater and this breaking up of the fallow ground has to do with asking yourself what is it that is keeping my ground hard. Is it sin? Is it the distractions? It might be idolatry. Or is it complacency? I think that we get accustomed to fruitless lives—fruitless lives when it comes to the kingdom, not when it comes to promotions at work or education or how well your kids or grandkids are doing, but rather what's going on as far as your contribution to the advance of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. We ask ourselves questions like, how's my prayer life? Did I pray today? What's going on in my prayer life? Is it focused on Jesus and on his kingdom or is it focused on Aunt Lulu's bunion surgery? What's going on there? Is there fruit in my life that looks like kingdom fruit? These are hard questions, even

for me to answer. When is the last time I had a conversation where I brought up the name of Jesus with somebody who is far away from Him? If you don't see fruit in your life, it probably suggests that the sowing of seed of righteousness in your life is somehow bouncing off the surface, just like Jesus said in the parable of the sower, when the seed goes on the hard ground, on the rocky soil, where the birds in the air come and snatch it up and take it away. The Enemy takes it away. If in the church our lives are fruitless, victory Satan.

The prophets tried to take people that are complacent in their sin and in their idolatry and in their selfishness, in their lust, in their pursuing after comforts, and their worshiping of things that are other than the living God. That distant rumbling sound, that's the Assyrian army and they are going to come and they're going to murder your people and they're going to salt your fields and there are tribes that 2,800 years later, we're going to called the lost tribes of Israel because you guys didn't listen. They speak with some force to God's people. Break up your fallow ground. How do you do that? When it comes to sin, identify and confess it. When you confess your sin, God snatches you out of the domain of unrighteousness, picks you up and drops you into the kingdom of righteousness. You're already in the Kingdom if you are a follower of Jesus, but He moves us across that boundary. What is on this side of the boundary? Fruit. What's the fruit? Steadfast love, delights, abundance. And what do you need to do? It is so simple. But is it easy? It is not.

When it comes to putting our trust in other things, we have to learn to challenge ourselves. A really good way to challenge yourself is if something comes into your life and you feel distress about it, God's word says, Philippians 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." The ideas is if something causes you anxiety, something you see on the news, something you hear about a family member, if that is rising up in you, that is the marker that there may be an idol at the other end of that, because you're putting your trust in something other than God. When it rises up, turn to Jesus. It's a discipline that we learn. When trouble comes, turn to Jesus. Drop to you knees in prayer when trouble comes, when fear comes, when anger comes, when you see something.

There is a third idea here. We need to refuse to settle for fruitlessness in our lives and the life of the church. Don't settle. You don't have to settle for a common life. You may not have a fancy education; you may not have a big house; you may not have a big income; but I know people that are like that. They just keep getting to the plate and hit right out of the park for the kingdom. Some of them just do it on their knees in prayer because they are elderly. They can't get out. Some of them do it in their relationships with other people, because they cannot just shut up about Jesus. Some of them do it basically in support structure of those who are praying, those who are proclaiming Jesus. They're all in. I am not going to settle for a life when I get to heaven, when you stand before the Lord, he says "What is the fruit of your life for my Kingdom?" and you hem and haw. Don't settle for that vision. It should be a vision of the crop to come. Can you imagine a world that is actually dominated by God's steadfast love? Like that's all there is. How does it come? When his kingdom comes. What's our role in that? To populate the kingdom with people that know Jesus. Don't settle for less.

I'll finish with a story from Ukraine. I once went on a trip and we were in Kiev while I was a seminary student. We met with a pastor and went to a little country church down

south. They all went into a small room, and when we pulled up, they greeted us with a brass band. It was amazing! While we were driving, it was potato planting season. The people could not afford a draft horse, but were blessed with a couple of big sons. They were in harnesses and broke up the fallow ground. This crowded, small church just loved Jesus in multiple languages, and when you looked around, the women all had bandages on their hands. They had to work the ground without the proper tools. Why? They did it for the fruit to come. This is what you do to get the harvest you need. The hard work to deal with the unrighteousness, to plant the seed of righteousness. That we might walk in his steadfast love, and there's no better place to be. The prophet finishes with these words, "For it is time to seek the Lord that he may come and rain righteousness on you." If you're a farmer in the Middle East, that's a harsh environment, and the picture of rain, God raining righteousness. his righteousness, his goodness, his blessing, his perfect plan for all of us and for the world around us. I could just imagine dancing in the rain, because that's what we need. And the prophet says it's time.

Devoted to Fellowship (Acts 2:42-47) by "Pastor Kyle"

Our theme for the entire year is "Move Forward." And that was kind of birthed out of our week of prayer and fasting the first month of the year in January and through our prayers and as God led us. Partly because of a quote from Rev. George Chapel in 1898, who was a pastor here, where he said, "God would never put the church in a place where advance is impossible." And so if Jesus hasn't come back, there is an opportunity for the church to be successful. Jesus said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it." And so we see this amazing beginning of a community in the book of Acts and we want to be encouraged by that. We want to see the way they connected, the way they saw the Holy Spirit move, and we want to see that happen in our day. Amen?

We're going to look at this in Acts chapter 2. We're going to look at verse 42- 47. [Scripture reading.] I love this passage of Scripture. I love the book of Acts. We're talking about a kingdom community today. We have communities, but they're not kingdom communities. The communities we have in the world, a lot of times, a community might be a local neighborhood, or a town, or like we would say the community of [name of town]. People create communities around common interests. Facebook has like what they call communities or groups, and like people from all around the world join together around some sort of common interest, and they create these groups. A community is really basically just doing life together. So for us to be a kingdom community, what sets us apart is we are doing new life together, new creation life together. Based not upon who we are, but based upon who God is. It's a second chance at life, being born again on the forgiven side of brokenness, people devoted to their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, instead of serving self.

And we said a couple weeks ago that most of life's hurts and wounds come from a dysfunctional family or community. And so it's so important for us to understand community and get it right so that the church can be a place of healing instead of a place that causes brokenness. That's what Jesus wants a community to be. And so as they formed this brand new community. It was because the church grew from seventy people to three thousand people after one sermon, after the Holy Spirit came down on Peter. The Holy Spirit came down on all the disciples, and then Peter got up and preached the sermon. Three thousand people said, "We want Jesus." And now all of a sudden, what do they do? And so they formed a community. And really the church was born that day.

And so this is what they did. This is how that community looked. They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, and to fellowship, to the sharing of meals, including the Lord's supper, and to prayer. And then the rest of that is a kind of a response, more in depth, about what happened there. They gathered together and they focused on the Word. That's what we talked about last week. We talked about they were devoted to the disciples teaching. We kind of do that in two different ways. They were meeting every single day in the temple for corporate worship and gathering in homes. We only do corporate worship once a week. But we gather together all together to encourage one another in corporate worship, to get around the Word of God together. But it doesn't stop there. We gather to encourage one another with the Word in small groups and in homes as well. Today we're going to focus in on this idea, just basically on this little phrase right here. It says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship." So they devoted themselves to fellowship.

That's such a weird word, isn't it? Like how often do hear people in the rest of the world that are outside of a church circle throw around the word fellowship? You know, how many people say things like, "Hey, let's get together, let's hang out," or whatever, but you don't hear them saying, "Hey what are you doing on Friday? Let's fellowship." Right? They don't really say that, so it's kind of, kind of a cliquey Christian word. But even though it is a word that we kind of hold on to, and it doesn't get used in a lot of other circles, I'm not sure if it is really a word we understand. Because a lot of times even in the church world, we think of the word fellowship. What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say the word fellowship? Time to eat, pot luck supper. Man, that's it, that's what comes to your mind. I was hoping somebody said it, because that's what I was anticipating your answer to be, right? It means casseroles. It means, you know, it means bratwurst. It means Father's Day cooked bratwurst, you know. It means children's day picnic, whatever. Fellowship means we come together and we eat.

This idea of fellowship, to make sure I was able to bring this this idea out today, I was looking in the Greek a little bit for fellowship. The word is *koinonia*. You probably heard me say it before, but I was just refreshing myself and looking back into the Greek, trying to understand a little bit more about the word fellowship. Because I know it's a much bigger word than potluck dinner together, set up the folding tables, and let's eat. It's more than just getting together and having a meal together. Although I will say getting together and having a meal together is a great expression of *koinonia*. I am not picking on the potluck at all. It's an even better expression of it, the smaller the circle. The smaller the circle, the greater the fellowship, because that's where it is more than just a meal. It becomes the conversation. It becomes the connection and all those sorts of things. *Koinonia* describes the unity that comes from the Spirit of God when his people are called by Him to come share their beliefs, convictions and behaviors. When we abandon independence in exchange for interdependence on God's commands and biblical principles, combined with the work the Holy Spirit does within us, genuine *koinonia,* biblical fellowship, occurs. True fellowship produces our mutual cooperation in worship, in work and God's will being done in the church. And true fellowship is not just beneficial for us as individuals. It also produces the testimony that impacts the world.

So interestingly enough, as we look at what the disciples devoted themselves to, they didn't devote themselves to outreach programs. It doesn't say that Peter devoted himself to preaching in public. It says they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to communion, to sharing meals together, and to prayer. So they devoted themselves to a lifestyle that left an impact that the world saw. And so as we kind of look at this, the word *koinonia* is translated in different words in the New Testament, to try and grab the heart of that sentence or phrase. Sometimes it's translated *fellowship*; other times it's translated *communion*; sometimes it's translated *communication*; sometimes it's translated *distribution*; sometimes it's translated *contribution*; sometimes it's translated *community* or *association*. And so as we look at this word, it has a really rich and deep meaning. It was more than just them being together. It was them belonging. If I were to try to summarize it in two words, fellowship would be to have common participation. It's like, that what's community it is. It's the fellowship participating together. It's the community participating, belonging. It's not a passive word where we just watch. That's what meals together can be, just watching. But it's that belonging.

This is some of the ways that fellowship really belongs and knits us together. First is the fellowship of the Spirit because ultimately this is what it is. When people agree on something, how many times have you seen this, when people agree on something, they're the best friends in the world, but as soon as they disagree on that thing, now they're enemies. We have something that is a bond that should be unbreakable because that bond is the grace of God who loved us enough to bring us redemption and hope. And so we come to this place where God says, "Here, confess your sins, and you can be forgiven." "No, but my sins are too bad." Where does that show up? No, there's not a sin that's unforgivable. So we come to Him and He forgives our sins if we'll repent and confess them to Him. Grace covers all wrongs when we come to Him with repentance and believe in the power of the cross.

And so we come together with that being our bond. Our bond isn't, I like the style of preaching pastor that he has. Our bond isn't, I like the music we have. Our bond is sort of, sometimes those things come into play, sometimes our bond is like where we live. I was just talking to somebody, I don't think they're here this morning, that they're moving to [name of town]. I said, "That sounds a little far from [name of church]." They're like, "No we'll still be there every week." Why would you drive from a far away town, right? *Koinonia*, the fellowship, the connection, the belonging to one another. Around what? Around this Spirit that is like an unbreakable bond because the Spirit brings us forgiveness. So what we have is this fellowship should be something that is an unbreakable bond. It's not just because we live in the same town or just because we like the same music. It's because we serve the same God. Amen?

Now the same God makes it the unbreakable fellowship and then where you live has a role to play in why you're at that church. Or who you knew and who invited you has something to do. But those aren't going to be the unbreakable bond, because guess what? We got like four families moving. I rebuke that in Jesus name. But people move. So where you live isn't the unbreakable bond. The style of music you make isn't the unbreakable bond. Whether you like my preaching or not is not the unbreakable bond. Jesus Christ is the bond that ties us together, you know. So whether I'm the pastor here or someone else is the pastor here, regardless of who's doing music on the stage, regardless of whether we're doing church out under tents or under a pavilion or in a building or whatever—those things don't matter. It's Jesus. Jesus is the one who holds us together. Fellowship begins with the Spirit, the fellowship of the Spirit, the Spirit leading us. And we're never going to experience great fellowship in all of those attributes unless the Holy Spirit is leading and guiding each one of us. Galatians says we need to keep in step with the Spirit, live by the Spirit and not live according to the flesh.

The second one I want to talk about because it is all over this passage here is the fellowship of communion. Because it's too big of a topic, I want to go into that next week. But I'll just say basically it kind of goes similar to talk about the Spirit, but the fellowship of communion and having meals together, stuff like that, the fellowship of communion especially is that the blood of Jesus is the one that makes us all one race, the one that makes us all one family, you know. He redeems us. We're all his brothers and sisters. And we're going to talk more about that next week.

The next one is the fellowship of sharing, the fellowship of sharing. You know it says that it says here in verse 45 they sold their property. They shared money with those in need. So if you look at the idea of *koinonia*, it can be translated distribution or contribution,

the idea of giving, and it can be translated like to the need. They gave. They shared what they had. And so literally what people did was they took their possessions and their property they sold it and they brought the money to the apostles because they said, "What we have, you know we're going to share it with everybody that is in need." When I look at the idea of sharing, there are two different ways you can look at this. You can look at the idea of giving so it is no longer in your possession. That's what Annanis and Sapphira failed to do which happens later in the book and they got in big trouble because they kind of held on and lied or just tried to get some credit for their giving and things like that. But there's sharing and then there's just like completely giving and releasing your rights to it. A great example of sharing is on a project like this. Right? So you see that roller over there. We can't really afford to buy a roller and we don't really need a roller after this is done, right? So we have a wonderful friend who lent us his roller and let us use it. That's a great share, because we don't have to buy one. We couldn't afford one. We'd have to rent one, that costs a lot of money. Then you know he's not using it so he's sharing it with us and letting us use it. That's awesome. A lot of the guys bring their own tools to come down here and work. The fewer tools we have to buy as a church to work on the project the better, right? So you share what you have. When it's not being used, the best thing to do is make sure it's being used. That's what we want, to be used for the glory of God. So if I have things that God has blessed us with and they're not being used, the best thing for them to do is to be used where they're needed, and that happens best through sharing. So they shared what they had.

Now crazy thing about sharing is that we have this demanding world when it becomes all about me, it's like we get this attitude, what you have should be mine, and that's a very dangerous, problematic attitude. When beautiful *koinonia* takes place, the attitude is what I have is yours. And there is a big difference between what I have is yours and what you have is mine. What you have is mine is all about me. But when I say, "What I have is yours, man. God has abundantly blessed me. It's all his in the first place and anything that I could do with this to bless somebody else, man, that's what I want to do." Now I'll bet you a lot of you have been burnt by that in the past, right? Because when it's not true *koinonia*, then somebody sees it and they're like, "Oh I could take advantage of this," and they keep taking and keep taking. So I'm not saying these things are simple. I'm saying we've made a muddy mess it of the world. But there is a place of *koinonia* where there's that beautiful sharing, and we're saying, you know, man what's mine is yours. Let me help you. And you know what, when you get burned by those things there's a learning lesson. If we truly said, "Hey it wasn't mine in the first place because it's been blessed with God, if it's no longer mine and it doesn't come back because the sharing went wrong, well, it's okay because it was God's in the first place." Come on, that was worth an Amen, but that's not usually how we see it. We want to give with a string, right? We want to share with a string. It's better to give than to share, but sharing is great. But giving is even better, because giving is with no strings attached. They shared and they came up with these ideas on their own. It was never demanded of them, the church didn't say, "Hey you got two properties. You've got to sell one." No, people said, "Man, God is doing an amazing thing here, and I have two properties. Let me sell one." And that's what happened. It was just out of the abundance of their hearts because they saw the needs of those around them.

Then there's the fellowship of giving. The *koinonia* could be translated as distribution or contribution. And we'll see that. We'll probably talk about that at other

times, because it's not in great detail here but it's in greater detail in other passages. The idea of distribution shouldn't be a welfare program, but it's this idea of saying, "God has blessed us. Let's pass that around." And in order for that to happen, people have to say, like, "Why has God given me so much? Let me make sure that I'm, you know, passing that blessing on, that I'm not thinking it's all just for me."

Here's where I want to spend a little bit of time talking about the fellowship of communication. Until I was studying for this sermon I never picked up on the word communication being translated in the New Testament being *koinonia*. I never picked up on that before so that was a new one to me. But that's so true. Like, if you want to have true fellowship, the food's not going to cut it. The food is a means to get people to sit together to communicate. And when communication happens, man that's when we share our heart. So often we guard our hearts. Man, we're not ready because we just don't know who we trust, right, so it takes time to develop trust. That's why the more you sit together, the longer a small group is together, the deeper a small group can go. I don't want to tell you, like, "Hey, find a stranger in the room and tell him your deepest darkest secret." I will never tell you to do that. And if it sounds like I said that, I didn't mean that. You know that's not a safe idea. You don't want to do that unless God really makes it clear to you that this is a person I can trust, you know. And that's why small groups are so important, because most of the world, we don't have that. We don't have conversations. We have conversations where we can talk about the weather and the sports and the latest movie. But we don't have places where we can say like, "Listen, I'm going to quit church, and I don't know where to go, and I don't know if God wants me to do that." You know if you don't have fellowship, you don't have people where you can go and say, "I need someone I can have this conversation with, because we don't want to make decisions on our own." So we've got to be good with our fellowship, with the communication of fellowship.

Now what makes communication not safe is when words of criticism and words of destruction come out of our mouths. So if somebody is going to tell you their instant response of the way you should have done it, if somebody is going to bring you sarcastic comments and whatever, if somebody's just going to brag abut themself all the time, those are perfect indicators that this is not a person that I'm going to open up my heart to, and I'm not going to have deep communication with him. Right? And so how are we going to respond? I just have one verse because this isn't the whole sermon. Philippians, no Ephesians 4:29 says, "Don't use foul or abusive language. Let everything you say be good and helpful so that your words will be an encouragement to those who hear them."

So when we sit down together, do we want to talk about just general life? Yeah, especially. So two things about friendship. In friendship, women, their number one bond is over communication, talking. Men's number one connection is through shared activity. So this is good for women to know about men and men to know about women. If I'm going to try to connect with my wife, what I have to do is I have to be patient in conversation. She has to know that I'm going to sit down long enough for her to start talking. Because she doesn't want to start a conversation that I'm not going to let her finish. So I have to sit down and be patient and not look like I'm in a rush and get off the phone and, you know, and sit down and just be available. And then she'll talk. For women, communication is done primarily through face to face. This is not the only way, you know, but it's through direct dialogue and conversation. For men, man is not going to talk if you put him across the table from another guy. There will be no communication or conversation. Now you grab a couple

shovels, you start working, you start talking. And it's amazing to me that with guys, the deepest things will come out when you're at the least focused time. Like, it's like we're not focused. We're in the middle of digging and whatever and then all of a sudden their heart starts to come out. Right? It's because men communicate best through shared activity. Women communicate best through direct dialogue. And so like you have to know that about each other.

For women this idea of communication means, take time. When do you take time to just sit and talk with your Christian family? When do you take time to sit and talk? I've been encouraging you guys several weeks to just stay after church was done. The way I did that was I gave you an assignment and made you break up into small groups. I mean, I'm not going to do that every week. Otherwise certain people will crucify me. Because the introverts said, "Hey, I'm going to another church from now on." But a lot of you have really told me, "I really love getting to know some people, and having this conversation was a really powerful experience." And so I appreciate your feedback. But I do want you to know, when we say "Amen," it doesn't mean you have to go. It doesn't mean you have to go. Like there's people to talk to; there's friends to be had. And, you know what, invite people to your house. We'll talk about this more in another week. But friendships, communication is so important. In order for those communications to happen, we can't be negative in our speech, because if we're negative in our speech today when it didn't matter, someone will not see us as a safe person when it does matter. See if you're not safe today when it's just fooling around, I'm not going to think you're safe to go to tomorrow when I have a deep wound, and I just need somebody to talk to. So if we can't get our communication right ahead of time, we can't prove to people that we're a safe place where now we can be there for one another. Are you guys getting what I'm trying to pass on?

The fellowship of work, and this is all through the New Testament, this fellowship is of projects. It's a fellowship of working together. Philippians 2:1-2 says, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind." In the middle of this working project, I was thinking about it. There's always a struggle when you're talking about volunteers. And you know we're not punching a clock. This isn't our nine to five job, right? And it's summer. People are on vacations, all this, and we're trying to figure out how are we ever going to get this done and everything. And what's it costing me? What's it costing you, for your time schedule. I told the guys yesterday afternoon. I can't think of anything I would rather do with my summer than to build something for God. I'm not saying don't go to the beach. Like no, you gotta do other things in the summer. You gotta go on vacation. You gotta go to the beach. You gotta do your fun things that, you know, matter to you and your family. Don't take what I'm saying wrong. But what I'm saying is, if I didn't go to the beach this summer, I wouldn't have a long term regret that next summer I'd be like, "Last summer was horrible. I ruined, I messed up the rest of my life because I didn't go to the beach last summer." Nobody's going to say that. But I can promise you for the rest of my life I'm going to remember back to this summer. The sweat and the holes in the board and I'm going to look back with pride upon what we did and what we built. I'm going to nitpick about the mistakes and, you know, all the stuff, you know like that's the hole that Sam's Gatorade is in. There's a dead mouse in hole number three and a pencil in hole number two. You know? It's like, you know, you remember what you did for God. [Name of church member] who

mows the lawn, he was talking about the weather, and he's like, "Remember when we put the roof on that building, which was like fifteen years ago, like, remember the day we were putting that that roof on? We were there working and the weather was that it was going to rain and somebody went on the weather channel and they printed out a map of the radar and every single part of Connecticut had rain and there was a little circle over [name of town]. There was just a little round circle over [name of town], and when we put the last shingle on it started raining." We'll never forget that story, right? Recreation is fun, but it's not as much fun as working in unity for the cause of Christ. Like there's nothing like working together in unity for the cause of Christ. And that unity is critical. Because if we're not working in unity and worshipping in our worship, then we're just working for no pay, right? That's not special. But it's special when it's this picture. He said, "Make me truly happy by agreeing wholeheartedly with each other, loving one another and working together with one mind and one purpose." That's just a beautiful picture and connection.

So there's a fellowship of association, and there are different levels of friendships. How many of you know that there are different levels of friendships? Hopefully, you're going to have somebody that you can call a lifelong friend. Most people have less than three lifelong friends. It's hard to have a lifelong friend, because when your lifelong friend dies or moves far away or whatever, if they move far away, they're still a lifelong friend and they'll prove the test of time. This is how you can tell, when you call them you pick up like you never left off. You can't get off the phone in less than an hour. And it doesn't feel like you haven't seen them, because you just fall right back into it. So you have lifelong friends, which are amazing. Because the circle we're in, even though it's *koinonia*, it doesn't mean that everyone in this circle is a lifelong friend. See we're friends by association. We'll be brothers and sisters in heaven and forever. But we're not all going to be best friends. What we have is a bond by association because of Jesus. Now a bond by association for other people might be that you work at the same company, right, or something like that. You work at a company and you're friends with these people and then when you leave that company, you don't do anything with them outside ever again, you know, because you don't work together. Maybe one time you meet up or something, and they're not really your friends anymore. They're not your friends, but because your association was broken, you don't have that friendship. Most of the people here are going to be like that association level friend. It doesn't mean they're not a true friend, it just means they're friends because we worship together and when they move away that friendship is not going to remain the same. There are levels of friendships. You can be friendly with everyone, but you can't be best friends with everybody. You don't have enough time to get into the heart of everybody and know everybody on that level. But you can care about everyone and that's a good Christian friendship. That friendship by association, you know, and so some of these friendships though will go deeper in your small group and they'll almost feel like lifelong friends and we'll never know whether they are a lifelong friend until you move. You can only test a lifelong friend after life, as time, and years, and life situations change. But there's a beauty of friends by association, and we want to drive that association a little bit deeper, to make sure that we do have lifelong friends. Lifelong friends aren't always the people that you get along the best with. Sometimes they are, but some of your best friends are people that disagree with you, and that's the cool thing about the unity of the faith, is that we can disagree about all sorts of things but we have that bond of Jesus. You know we don't have to like the same music; we don't have to like sports or gardening or whatever it is. We can

just all be different. And we have that bond of Jesus. And that's that friendship we have, that fellowship of association.

The fellowship of suffering, the fellowship of suffering. And with the fellowship of suffering, man, there's nothing like going through a hard time. But nothing gets you through a hard time like knowing you have people going through that hard time with you. You know the Bible says to weep with those that weep, you know, and rejoice with those who rejoice. Sometimes we get to throw the parties together, right? Sometimes we celebrate a new baby, a graduation, a birthday, you know, a new job. We celebrate things together and those celebrations are awesome; they're fun. But the celebrations that show true friendship and show that we mean a lot to each other and that we have people in our life are when we're going through a hard time. When things get tough, that's when you find out who your friends are. When you lose somebody, it's so important that we have the fellowship of suffering together, that you weep with those that weep, that you call those that need it. It's taken me a long time through pastoring to actually figure this out. Because everybody's different. People like a different amount of space. You know there's people that will call me up and a week after, somebody died, I didn't even know they were sick. They'll call me up a week later and be like, "Hey, can you do a funeral?" And then there's other people that they call me and they want me to be at the house before the person dies, and they want me to be there with them. They need someone to go through the experience. People are different. You know I've had people kick me out of a hospital room. There's some people that would say, like, "Thanks for calling. Don't visit." And there's other people who want you to be there every day. People are different. But this is what I just want to help you out with. I learned that with [name of church member], and she was in the hospital, and I don't remember why she was in the hospital, it was years before she died. She was in the hospital one time and I said to her, "Would it be okay if I was there?" And she said, "It's always okay if you're here." She said that, and I'm like, "I just don't know if you need space." And she said, "I would love it if you came." And then she said something to me, and I don't remember the exact words, but she said, "Always take the chance," or something like that. It's better to get kicked out than to not show up, okay? It's better to get kicked out than to not show up. And look around. That's not just my job. *Koinonia* says it's our job. It's better to get, it's better for someone to say, "Hey, I'd rather not talk about that," then for you to not bring it up. It's better to get kicked out than to not show up. And you want to give people space; you don't want to over burden them. I just want to encourage you to, say, never assume someone else will call. Never assume someone else will show up. Man, we've gotta weep with those that weep. We also have to rejoice with those that rejoice. So don't assume that somebody else gave somebody a high five when they did a great job. Give them the high five! And don't assume somebody else showed up to cry with somebody. Make sure, and be the one willing to be there. Because that's when real *koinonia* happens. That's when real fellowship happens. When you walk through it together, when you help somebody move, you know, whatever, all these things.

All right, so I'm going to wrap up with this. But here's your homework. I want you to address this. I want you to say, what area of *koinonia*, what area of fellowship, do I need to grow in? That I need to grow in? Is it that I won't sit down at a table with somebody? Is it that I need to pay better attention to weep with those that weep? Is it, you know, that I need to do the work project? That I need to do more sharing or giving? What part of *koinonia*? Are you being independent instead of interdependent? Because *koinonia* is giving

up independence, that I'm a Christian, and saying I want to be interdependent, because Christ is the one that holds us all together. I want to just challenge you to take that and ask what area of fellowship do I need to grow in? And let God work on you this week and maybe look up some verses on it. In what way can I grow in my fellowship this week?

Living the Calling (Ephesians 4:1-16) by "Pastor Luke"

So this is our seventh week now in our series on the book of Ephesians. If you want to follow along in your own Bible, I encourage you to open up to where we left off last week, which is Chapter 4, verse 1. And what's happening today is a special day, because we are crossing over into the second half of the letter. The first three chapters, Paul has been talking about who we are and what we have in Christ. And now this shift is going to happen where in this second half he is going to be talking about what that means for how we live our lives. So the first half of Ephesians is all about being and the second half is about doing. And that order is important. It's important that we recognize that that's the way it's supposed to go, right? Because what we are supposed to do is supposed to flow out of who we recognize ourselves to be and what we believe. And when we get the order reversed, it leads to all kinds of problems, right?

So let's do a quick recap about what Paul has said about who we are in Christ. So just in case you haven't been around the last month or so, or you have forgotten. It's a fantastic list that he has given us—who we are in Christ. First, we are loved by God with a love that is bigger than we can comprehend. Paul says it is higher and wider and deeper and longer than what we can imagine. We actually need supernatural power in order to grasp it. We are also part of a new humanity that is not defined primarily by ancestry, nationality, or even religious laws. These are the things that typically define human beings, and it's not that they play no role at all in our identity. But in Christ we have an identity that is rooted primarily in something else, in the mercy and love of God, who we are in Christ. We are part of a unity of diversity that is proving the powers of evil wrong. And then lastly we are part of a plan to help bring all things in heaven and on earth to unity under Christ. Another way of putting that would be we are part of God's plan to help to bring peace in the world.

So the question is, do you see yourself this way? Because throughout Ephesians so far, the first three chapters, Paul has been encouraging us to trust in Jesus and then choose to see yourself like this in Christ and everything that comes with that. So now, the second half of the letter, Paul is going to get a bit more specific about how our identity should play itself out in the way that we live in the world.

So, let's read Chapter 4 starting in verse 1, "As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." I want to pause here, just in case there is any confusion. Paul is not referring to us as God's prisoners. There is a sense in which we are servants of God, of course, but it's better to think that, it's not that God imprisons us, it's that God sets us free. Sin imprisons us, the devil imprisons us, the forces of the world imprison us, but God sets us free. What Paul is reminding us here is that he was writing this in prison. He had been put there by the Roman Empire because of his missionary efforts. So what he is doing here? He is basically saying, hey, as a guy who loves the church enough to suffer for it, and I am suffering for it, here is what I want you to know. "Live a life worthy of the calling that you have received." This calling that he has been talking about for the first three chapters.

And now he is going to talk about what it looks like to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. So, continuing in verse 2, "Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, when you were called. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is

over all and through all, and in all." So my paraphrase, please get along with each other. Maintain unity. Remember several weeks ago we talked about how part of the purpose of the church is to demonstrate to the unseen spiritual forces of evil that God's wisdom is better than their so-called wisdom. And God's wisdom is to bring people from all nations into one family, both Jews and Gentiles. So the way that we prove the unseen forces of evil wrong is by being what I like to call a "unity of diversity." The spiritual forces of evil say there is absolutely no way that a people from different cultures, with different nationalities, who speak different languages, and have different political leanings, and you know some like the Red Sox and some like the Yankees—there is no way that they are going to be able to come together and not hate each other. And the church is supposed to be this sign to the unseen spiritual powers, that actually, no, you're wrong! But of course proving the spiritual forces of evil wrong is not easy because they're always working against us. They're always trying to stir up division and hostility and fear. They're always trying to get us to be self-righteous and prideful and to turn against one another. And it actually takes effort, real effort, to maintain unity. That's why Paul says, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit." In a church, in a community of people, unity is not something that could just be passively received. It's something that actually needs to be worked for. It takes effort.

Paul says, here is how you actively seek it. He gives three commands: Be humble, be gentle, be patient. Another way he puts it is bear with one another. Be humble, be gentle, be patient. You know, and a simple way of putting this is, love one another. One of my favorite passages to go back to is 1 Corinthians 13, which is Paul's famous description of love and you may notice that the way he describes love in that chapter sounds a lot like these commands here. Right? He says, love is patient; love is kind; it is not proud; it does not boast; it always perseveres. Be humble, be gentle, be patient. You know Paul could have said, well, this is how you live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Get out on the street corner and preach. This is how you live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Memorize every chapter and verse in the Bible. But instead he chooses to give primacy to these things. Now, don't get me wrong, Paul cares very much about evangelizing and spreading the gospel. Paul cares very much about the Scriptures and interpreting them well. I mean Paul was one of if not the greatest evangelist and Bible expositors that the world has ever known. But, when he told us here is how you live out a life worthy of the calling you have received, he chose to give primacy to these kinds of things: humility, gentleness, patience.

So let's talk about these. Be humble. What is humility exactly? I think some people have this idea that humility is thinking badly of yourself, you know, assuming that there is really nothing that I am that great at, nothing that I am more qualified to do than anybody else. But that can't be right. I mean if I'm supposed to have surgery, I don't want the surgeon getting some radical idea of humility and saying to the receptionist, "Oh, you know you could probably do this just as well as I could. Why don't you have at it?" So that doesn't make sense, right? That can't mean what real humility is. So some people say real humility is thinking of yourself accurately. And I definitely think that that is part of humility, but it's not everything, because you could have somebody who thinks of themselves accurately. They could be a great athlete and know that they're a great athlete, but they might not be humble. They might brag about it all the time. So that's not quite right either. What humility really is is not being preoccupied with yourself. Doesn't mean you don't recognize what your gifts and strengths are. Just means you don't feel a need to always be boasting about it

and focusing on it. C. S. Lewis said, “Humility isn’t thinking less of ourselves, it's thinking of ourselves less.” I think he put it very well there. Now I think for some people, humility will mean thinking less of yourself. But, generally speaking, that's a good perspective. It’s just real humility that means you're not so fixated on your own concerns, your own needs, your own preferences. If somebody who is not humble comes into a church or any environment, they’re thinking mainly about their will. Does this place conform to my will? If it does not, can I assert my will upon it? Can I come into this place and be the center of attention? But, when we’re humble, we’re able to come into a community and not think only about our own needs but think about other people's needs and concerns and perspectives, right? And any church, any community that’s going to be healthy, has to have humble people.

What about gentleness? Be gentle. I think one way of describing gentleness would be it is the ability to be in conflict with someone but still show care for them. We're going to be in conflict sometimes, with each other. But when the conflicts arise, are you able to handle them in a way that makes the other person, people not feel demonized or disrespected? Are you able to handle it in a way that makes it clear that you're actually for this person, you're not against them? That's gentleness. And then, for patience. I would describe patience as the ability to not jump ship the moment other people's imperfections are revealed. We’re all supposed to be humble and gentle, but we will not be all the time. And when that happens we need to show one another patience, rather than just jumping ship, right?

Humility, gentleness, patience. If the people in a church are growing in these qualities, the powers of darkness are proven wrong. But if not, if we’re preoccupied with ourselves, if we can’t disagree with someone without hating them, if we jump ship the moment that imperfections are revealed, well, then the powers of darkness laugh. And I like to imagine that they say, “Oh, maybe we were right after all.” Now notice, Paul says, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit.” And what Paul is clarifying there is what we’re actually unified around. It's important to recognize that there is something that we are supposed to be connected by. It’s not, it’s not nationality; it’s not ancestry. But there is something that binds us. It’s not “anything goes” in the church, right? And what it is is this shared experience of the Spirit of God and a shared recognition that we know God through Jesus Christ. So anywhere we go, where there are fellow people who recognize Jesus is Lord, who have had this experience with the Spirit of God, who have expressed that through baptism, we should be doing all that we can, within our power, to maintain unity with them. All of the “ones” that Paul lists here are the things that are supposed to bind us: “one Spirit, one body,” meaning the church, “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” This is supposed to be the center that we are all united around.

Alright, let's keep reading in verse 7. Paul is going to shift to a new topic here. “But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” So what Paul is saying here is something like to each one of us, Christ has allotted certain gifts. So far he has been talking about unity. And now he is talking about one of the reasons why unity is so important. And it's because each one of us has been given certain strengths, certain abilities, from God, for the benefit of the whole. So if we’re not unified, we’re going to miss out on the benefit that we have from being together. Right? God has set things up such that we need each other. So again, “But to each one of us, grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.” This is why it says, “When He ascended on high, he took many captives and gave gifts to his people. What does He ascended mean except that He also descended to the

lower earthly regions. He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens in order to fill the whole universe." If you're confused by that section there, don't worry about it. I was very confused as well, took a while to figure that out. So, I'll do my best to break it down. What Paul does here is he quotes a psalm from the Old Testament, something that he loves to do, quote Psalms. Specifically, it's Psalm 68. And that psalm is a psalm about God defeating his enemies, ascending to power, and then giving gifts to the Israelites, to his people. And what Paul is saying is that we should see in that psalm a pattern that Christ then fulfilled. Now it's important to recognize the way that Christ fulfilled it is not the way that the people probably expected Him to fulfill it. Rather than conquering physical enemies, he conquered spiritual enemies. Rather than conquering through warfare, he conquered through dying on a cross. Rather than ascending an earthly throne, he ascended a heavenly throne. And rather than giving gifts of the spoils of war to the Israelites, he is giving spiritual gifts to the church. So, he has fulfilled this, not in the way that the people were expecting, but in a different way and really, a better way.

And then Paul has this little aside, which is kind of strange, where he says that we should recognize that Christ needed to descend before he could ascend. Now people have different ideas about what exactly Paul has in mind when he talks about this descending. Is he specifically thinking about when Christ took on flesh and became a human being, right? Going from heaven to earth, that's a descension. Or is he talking about an even further descension which is Christ dying and going down to the realm of the dead. I would say either way, the point is the same. Either way, the point Paul is making is, hey let's not forget that before Christ ascended to this throne of power, he humbled himself, he descended. Which ties us back to Paul's earlier point, which is that we're supposed to be humble. If Christ is Our Lord and we're supposed to be emulating him, that we should be the kind of people that believe that in order to truly be exalted, we need to humble ourselves. We need to descend before we ascend. The reason that Paul brings this up is because he wants us to realize that Christ is now fulfilling the last part of the pattern of Psalm 68, in which he is giving gifts to his people, spiritual gifts to each one of us.

Let's keep reading, verse 11 [Scripture reading]. Let's go back to the first part of that passage. "So Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip his people for works of service." Now here's how you might have understood Paul's train of thought. God is giving gifts to strengthen and empower the church. The gifts that he gives are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. That's what a lot of people probably hear when they read that. Now that's partially right, but I don't think that's quite what Paul was saying. Here's what I think Paul was saying: Christ apportions gifts to all of us. Remember that, we already identified that. It's not just for the apostles, the evangelists, the prophets and teachers, not just for the church leaders. Christ gives gifts to all. So, he has appointed church leaders to help his people use their gifts. You see the difference there. It's a subtle difference, but it's important.

Do you guys know who the ministers at [name of church] are? So this is a trick question. If I had a big mirror I'd hold it up. We all are supposed to be ministers at this Church. Now, [name of church pastor] and I are pastors, so according to Paul, we have a special role, right? Our special role is to equip you to minister. It is to equip you for works of service. Remember, Christ gave, Christ himself gave Pastors to equip his people for the works of service. And actually that word service is the same word that gets translated as ministry. So, you all are supposed to be ministers. And what that means is that you are all

called, with your lives, to serve God and to serve others and to be part of this mission to reveal the love of Christ to the world. And you have been given specific abilities, talents, circumstances that make it possible for you to do that in a unique way. And what people like [name of church pastor] and I are supposed to be doing is helping you to do that well. And you know guys, I just have to confess that studying this passage this week was a wake up call for me, because I had to be honest with myself. I had to ask, am I fulfilling this role? And you know I, I hope and pray that when I stand up here and I preach and when I meet with you guys and pray for you, that I am helping to equip you for ministry. But if I'm honest I think this is something I could grow a lot in. And it's a good perspective shift to think that not just that I want to minister to you, but that I want to help you to step into your calling as a minister. And what Paul says here is that it's not until we all recognize our own roles as ministers that the Church actually grows into maturity. Until we each own that, we're always going to be, as Paul puts it, like infants that get tossed around by the waves and that whenever somebody has something to teach that sounds interesting but might not be true, we'll be more likely to fall for it. The thing that guards against false teaching is actually getting involved, serving in some way. Being a minister.

Let me just be clear, okay, ministry is not just evangelizing; it's not just teaching the Bible. It can be, it should be. That's part of it, right? But ministry is also things like visiting people who need a friend, taking care of people who are sick. It's volunteering to help set up or take down after service. It's using music and the arts to glorify God and to lead people in worship and to help communicate biblical truths. It could be babysitting. It could be writing notes of encouragement for people. You know if you have skills in technology, it could mean utilizing technology, utilizing graphic design. All kinds of stuff like that, right? Any role that involves serving God and serving others is an opportunity for ministry.

Here's what I want you to think about today, and hopefully throughout this week, a couple things for reflection. So, one, finish this sentence: I am equipped to serve God and others by…fill in the blank. I am equipped to serve God and others by… And you don't have to have something that is super unique. It doesn't have to be something that only you can do. Just try to fill in that blank somehow and also a way that I enjoy serving God and others is by…blank. Now of course, if we're humble, our desires shouldn't be the center of everything. But if you can do acts of service actually in a way you enjoy, well, that's probably a good way to do it. So that's the first thing to do. Finish those sentences and then ask yourself, "Am I doing this? And if not, how can I?" And if you want to, meet with [another pastor] and me to talk about how you might be able to do those thing, in this context or even outside of this church in some way. We'd be happy to meet with you and process that and pray about that. One other resource I'd like to encourage you to use is something called Strength Finders. Have you guys heard of this? This is not like a specifically biblically-based thing, or anything like that, but I do think it's helpful. It's a test that has thirty-four different strengths, and you take the test, and it tells you what it thinks your five top strengths are and what that means. And it costs $20 to take it, and if money is an issue, we would be happy to pay for you to take the test. It's just if we pay for it, you have to agree to meet with us to talk through your results. And we're not going to, like, force you to do anything you don't want to do, but that's just the agreement. So, if you want to do this, let us know and we would be happy to help make that happen. So let's learn what gifts Christ has apportioned to us for works of service.

Know My Heart (Psalm 139) by "Pastor Matthew"

The theme, just to review from last week, the theme of this psalm of David is that God is involved in our lives. We talked about how this psalm tells us four things: God needs you, God knows you, God is for you, God is involved in our lives. How? God made us. God is involved from the time you become a person in your mother's womb. This psalm says it more detailed than in any other text in the Bible that God was involved in knitting together and making and forming who you were. In fact it says that while you were in your mother's womb, God was writing a plan for every single day of your life. Some people like John the Baptist were even filled with the Holy Spirit while in their mother's womb. Jeremiah was called into the ministry by God while he was in his mother's womb. So we talked about this is why abortion is wrong, because only God should decide who lives and who dies.

The second point I want to bring up is because God knows you. That might seem trite to you, but if you think about God and who He is and what He has done—that He is the one who holds the stars in their orbit, he's the one who created and spoke into existence the entire universe with the word of his mouth—that almighty, all powerful God knows you. He knows my thoughts. He even goes on to say He knows every word that is on my tongue. God knows it. David is showing us God isn't just involved in your life, "I got a plan for your life." God is intimately involved in our lives. God is involved in every detail of our lives. He knows everything. In the Hebrew, when you translate this directly in the Hebrew, the verse literally translates, "You understand my thoughts in their origin." In other words, you not only know my thoughts, but God even knows the process of how that thought originated. God doesn't just know what you think, he knows why you think what you think. Isn't that amazing?

Hebrews 4:12, [Scripture reading]. God doesn't just see what you do, he sees why you do it. Psalms 94:11: "The Lord knows all human plans." Matthew 9:4, [Scripture reading]. Jesus said He know all things. He knew their hearts. He knew their thoughts. Several times in the Gospel, Jesus knew what they were thinking before they even said it. First Chronicles 28:9 says that God knows all thoughts. "I am encompassed in by you in everything." Acts 17:28: "In you we live, and move, and dwell, and have our very being." When it says that God knows our thoughts and He knows our words, look at Psalm 139:5. "You hem me in behind and before, you have laid your hands upon me." God knows everything about us. In verse 4 and 5, notice he says, if I go before, if I go behind, if I go beside, God is there. Think about it. I look back, I see the hand of God on my life. If I look ahead in the future, I can feel the hand of God in my life. If I look around me, I sense the hand of God in my life. My past, my present, and my future are surrounded by God. That should be encouraging to you. That's why He is the alpha, the omega, the beginning, the end, the first, the last, all at the same time. God is already in your future and in your past at the same time. That's hard for us to comprehend, isn't it? I am hemmed in by God. There is no place that I can go that God is not. I am secure here. I am safe here. God is surrounding me. As a child of God, the devil cannot attack me from my past, from my future, from my present. He cannot attack me spiritually from above. He cannot come up from beneath. If God is for me, who can be against me? Why are you afraid when God has you hemmed in? The only way that the devil can get to me is if I break out of God and put myself in a vulnerable situation.

God might say, like He did to Job, "Okay Satan, I'm going to let you in and touch." What's that for? That's a test. God allows us to be tested so that we can see what is going on in our lives, so that He can reveal his glory and his ability to overcome everything through us in our lives. But, get the picture, God is surrounding you. You are hemmed in by God. Why are you afraid, why are you anxious, why are you worried about the past or the future? God is already there. He's got you covered.

Verse 6, the psalmist said, "This knowledge is too much for me." What he is saying is I can't wrap my head around this, at the God of the universe so involved in my life he has me hedged in. David starts to think if God knows my thoughts, if God knows what I am going to say before I say it, I'm in trouble. The thought that God knows your thoughts can be peace-giving and it can also be very troubling, because I do not know about anybody that is watching online today, but my thoughts are not always pure thoughts. You think the pastor, you know, just thinks about Jesus all the time. That's the goal, that's what I desire in my life. The psalmist shifts a little bit and he says, no doubt David starts to think about what he's thinking about, and the results are, "Is God going to be happy with me?" The psalmist says, you know what if God knows what the people can't see. God's going to strike me down. I mean God is holy. I'm not going to please God. So now he changes his phrasing, he says this, "Where can I run from God?" Where can I flee and hide, because God knows my thoughts and my heart and He sees that it's not what it should be? The conversation changes, which brings us to our third point.

God is with you. Psalm 139:7-12: "There is no place I can go that God is not." Jeremiah 23:23: "Am I only a God who is nearby, declares the Lord, and not a God who is far away? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them? Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?" Or Proverb 15:23: "A person finds joy in giving an apt reply, and how God is, is a timely word." Lets look at 1 John: "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all." The Psalmist says, you know what, if God is everywhere present, then I am going to hide in the darkness. I'm going to find a place where there's no light and I can hide and God can't see me. Then he says God is there in the darkness because with God there is no such thing as darkness. Even the darkness is light for God. In fact God created the lights that we have. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. Genesis 1, before he created the sun, the stars and the moon, the greater and the lesser light, God stepped into the universe and when he did in the beginning, there was light. What was that light? That light was God. When God enters the scene, there is light. I cannot hide.

The fact that God is everywhere present and you can't hide from him, for the sinners that are in this room, for the sinners who are watching online, that's bad news. You can't hide from God. God sees what's going on in your life. For the sinner, that's bad news. For the saint, it's good news. You are never outside of God's reach. We are never alone. God will never leave us or forsake us. Darkness will never be able to overcome us. The light came into the darkness. The darkness could not comprehend it, because in God there is no darkness. Now it makes sense. The text now makes another shift. Rather than falling from God, fleeing from God, the writer of the psalm now declares the opposite. I am not running from God. I cannot hide from God. Actually, he declares God is running towards me. God is pursuing me. Did you know that this morning that God is after you? God loves you. He wants you and if you have sin in your life and you're not living for God, God is not distant from you. He is after you. In fact He's brought you here to hear this word this morning. He died for you. You are valuable to him. He paid the ultimate price for you and He has come to

deliver you and set you free, to give you eternal life. Can you say, "Praise God?" God paid this price for you, which leads to the next truth.

That leads us to our next point. God is for you. Psalm 139:17-18, the psalmist says that the thoughts of God—he says, when I think about your thoughts they amaze me. In the Hebrew it's literally this, how amazing are your thoughts concerning me when I think about the thoughts you have towards me. It's difficult for us to comprehend this, but the psalmist is telling us God is thinking about us all the time. You are the center of his universe. You are the center and the apex of his creation, the apple of his eye. You are why He created the universe and he is very much involved in your life. He's thinking about you all the time. I was reading a scientific journal about thoughts, and it said that people typically have about six thousand thoughts in the waking hours, 6.5 thoughts per minute. And I thought that God has even more thoughts toward me. Wow! The psalmist said it's like the sand in the sea. Looking at sand you can see the little tiny grains of sand. In just a handful of sand there are probably hundreds of thousands of little grains of sand. The psalmist says, like the sand of the sea, the trillions and trillions, he says, these represent the thoughts that God has towards me. God cares about you that much. He is constantly thinking about you. You say, "But what's he thinking?" He gives us a clue. Jeremiah 29:11: "I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord. Plans to prosper you, to not harm you, but to give you a hope and a future." My thoughts towards you are good thoughts. My plans towards you are good plans. Even though we are fallen, even though we are sinful creatures, God is for us. Psalm 103:11 says that God's thoughts are towards us. Psalm 117:2. Ephesians 2:4: "You who are dead in trespasses and sins have been quickened and raised up to sit together with Him in the heavenly places." Romans 5:8: "God is for us, and if God is for us, who can be against us?"

Now the psalmist makes a radical shift as we get down to these next verses. The language changes and everything. He says, "Okay, God knows me, God made me, God is with me, God is for me." Then he starts to talk about hating people. He asks himself, if God is this wonderful and if He cares and is involved about this much in my life, how should I then respond to God, his goodness for me? He gives three responses. Knowing the knowledge that we have from Psalm 139. We should respond first of all with overwhelming gratitude. We should be overwhelmed in our attitude towards God that He is involved in our lives, that He knows us intimately and in spite of our thoughts He loves us. He's got us hemmed in and He's got a plan for our lives written before we are even born that's how much God is involved in our lives. We should be very grateful for that. I know many people who think, "Well, it could be worse." The Psalmist gives us a different way of looking at our troubles. He says God has got you covered. God knows you. God has a plan for your life. God has you hemmed in. It couldn't be better. It couldn't be better! For the children of God, for the people of God, even when bad things happen to us, this should be our attitude. My body, my finances, may not be good right now, but my God is good. My wife may not be talking to me right now, but my God is good. No matter what happens to me in this life, I have a mansion waiting for me in glory and I am going to be with Him forever. It couldn't be better! Everything I am going through right now is just temporary. It is just a test, and it's all going to make me more like Jesus. Next time someone asks you how you are, reply, "It couldn't be better." So stop whining and start shining folks.

Second, we respond with overwhelming humility. We should be humbled that the God of the universe knows us and that He is involved in our life. We should be humbled that Jesus became a man, put on flesh and blood, God in the flesh, Emmanuel, God With Us, for

the very purpose of suffering and dying for us. We should be humbled by that. Everybody knows John 3:16, but do you know 1 John 3:16? It's just as powerful a verse. "This is how you know what love is. Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, so we ought to lay down our lives for one another." I want to ask you this morning—Jesus died for you, why can't you live for him?

The third way we should respond is with overwhelming jealousy. When you read the words in this final section, you say to yourself, "What's this all about?" He's talking about, "I absolutely hate these people, the enemies of God. God, I want you to destroy them." The English language here is very harsh. But really in a nutshell when you read it in the Hebrew, it's saying this, that the psalmist, in response to God's great plan that He had for him, had a holy jealousy from God. He had a righteous indignation against evil. He said anything or anyone who comes against God's love and plan for my life or for his people, I want to take them out. He said I love righteousness and I hate evil. It comes down to this. The closer you get to Jesus, the more you love righteousness and the more you hate evil. Because you see what the devil is doing and how he's come to kill, to steal and to destroy from God's plan for every single person on this earth. And the closer you get to Jesus, the more angered, spiritually jealous for God, you should be on the inside. Spiritual jealousy—this isn't what you hear about from the pulpit. Honestly, this is an element that's missing in the church today: jealousy for God, righteous anger when sin and evil come in. The truth is some of you get more upset with your brothers and sisters than you do with the devil, and he is your enemy. Jesus had this jealousy for his Father, when He went to the temple the first time and He saw all the money exchangers there making money and taking advantage of the people right in the temple grounds in the house of God and He made a whip and He flipped the tables over. This mild Jesus, who like a lamb went to the slaughter, he makes a whip, he gets angry, he turns the tables over, and he has righteous indignation! He's jealous for God, and he says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of thieves." He got jealous for God. He acted. He did something about it. Jesus had jealousy for God. He spoke very harshly and directly to the false teachers and the religious manipulators that were leading people to hell. He told those who would harm little children, it would be better for you that they tie a millstone around your neck and cast you into the sea than what's coming for you. He was jealous for righteousness and holiness of his Father.

David the psalmist said these people, they use your name in vain. They come against you. They hate the things of God. His spirit was riled up. He wanted to do something about it. Where is that righteous indignation? Where is that holy jealousy for God and holiness and purity and righteousness in the church today? Is it in your life? It was in David's heart. It was in Jesus's heart. Is it in your heart? Are you jealous for the things of God?

Let me ask you a question. If you had a baby in a little crib, in your house, and you came in that room, and you saw a poisonous snake crawling into that bassinet to attack your baby, would you sit back and say," Now that snake shouldn't be in this room!" No, you would take violent action. You would pounce upon that snake; you would attack that snake; you would crush that snake; you would remove that snake from your home! Where is that jealously in the house of God that we would let sin just creep in, the enemy just come in, and steal, kill, destroy! And we just sit back and say, "Well, yeah I see it, but you know I don't want to get involved. I don't want to offend anyone." Listen, it's time for us to stand up and to speak up! And when we do, things will change. I'm so excited, so not excited, I am

excited, but I mean I'm—just think about when this country signed Roe versus Wade. It made it a law, legal to abort children, but there are Christians and believers that did not shut up, they stood up and they took action and they protested and they, regardless, year after year, they never gave up. And they put people into office that would put people into positions that would be able to change this, and bring righteousness back, and take the stain of sin and curse off of our nation. And they stood up and they did something, and they acted. Aren't you glad that they did? Because they were jealous for God and his righteousness and they hated sin. They saw babies being plucked out of their mothers' wombs at six months old, limb by limb, cut apart and pulled out. And they didn't just say, "Well, you know, that's the law of the land." No, they said, "We've got to do something about this!" And then the last days, evil is raising its head up. Let me tell you what, this is going to be a part of the church that is living a lie, that God is going to use. It that we are going to have a righteous jealousy for God and righteousness and holiness and purity. It's going to be a war, but we're going to give, we're going to fight for God. We're going to fight for righteousness; we're going to fight for purity; we're going to fight for holiness; we're going to fight for truth.

I know it's kind of quiet in here this morning. Pastor, you don't usually talk this way. I'm stirred up! I'm stirred up because I feel that the Holy Spirit is grieved. I feel the Holy Spirit is grieved. We have become so afraid of offending people that we don't say anything, we don't do anything. And sin just comes in and steals. We see it happening. I see people in my own church, the devil just come in and snatched them right out. And the Holy Spirit has been convicting me this week, convicting me a lot. And so I want to convict you. Now, I don't want to convict you. I don't want this to come across as Pastor Matthew sheering his sheep today. That's not my job. I'm trying to project to you what the Holy Spirit has put in my heart. He wants us to be jealous for Him. He is jealous for us. He died for us. What does that look like Pastor? I see such complacency. I see it in my own life. In our text it says they misuse, he says, "I hate those who misuse your name." When you're watching a show on TV, and somebody says "G.D." or "J.C.," and they curse God's name, do you get angry? Do you turn the channel? If you don't, something's wrong with your heart. Now you're judging me, Pastor. No, I'm not. I'm telling you we should be jealous for God's name. Well, yeah, but I hear things at work all day, a lot worse than what I heard in that movie. You can't control what people say, but you can control what you allow in your ears.

Can I just preach for a minute? What we allow through our eyes and what we allow through our ears, what we see, what we listen to, what we view, what we read are portals to our soul. This is how we feed the spirit, man, that God has given us. And the psalmist is simply saying, I love it! I love it when you feed me your Word. How I love thy word! I love it when you feed me your Word, and I hate it when you feed me junk. Evil is going to wax worse and worse, 1 Timothy says, in the last days. We have to rid ourselves of impurities. We have to be careful of what we watch, what we see, what we listen to. I know there have been times when I've thought, "Well, that's just a character." And that character comes on and you know I'll just fast forward. No, no, no! We should be like angry. I'm ready to just throw my TV out the window, folks. Maybe we just need to have a mass TV burning here one day. I mean there is just such wickedness and disdain for God and everything that's righteous. And it's time for us to not just stand back, but to do something about it.

I may have told you this story several years ago. I buy all the gas for the church van and even for my own vehicles down at this gas station down the road here. And I went in

there one morning to get a drink of water. And I went up to the counter, and there right there where you check out, there were these pornographic videos, right there where kids could see them, whatever. And the guy, I said, "Is the manager here, the owner here?" "Yeah," he said, "he's in the back." I said, "Go get him for me." I got angry. I told the man, I said, "These are pornographic videos," I said, "right here where everybody can see them." I said, "I have sons and I don't want them to come in here and I'm asking you to move these." And I said, "This is wrong. You are exposing children to things they should not be seeing." He said, "Oh blah, blah, blah." "And if you don't move them you will never see me. And everybody I know, I will tell them, 'Do not go to this gas station.'" So the next week I came back and they were gone. They were gone. Well, you say, you weren't showing the love of Jesus. Well, I was showing jealousy for my God. We've gotta stand against evil. And we've got to be wise. There's times that we speak and there's times that we don't speak. The Holy Spirit will guide us. But we've got to start somewhere. Some of you just need to start by turning the channel. And you need to take some books in your house and throw them in the garbage. Some of you need to re-examine the music you are listening to. The sound and the beat are so good, but the devil is speaking right into your spirit, man—adultery, fornication, ludeness, sensuousness, pride, sensuality. And you're letting it all come in. Where is the jealousy for God? We need the Holy—we need to listen to the Holy Spirit speaking within us saying, "Run from evil and run to God. Run to righteousness." Please don't get mad at me this morning, okay?

Where is our jealousy for God? The psalmist, I believe, examined himself in this psalm and knew that there were things in his life that he needed to change. And so he closes with these verses. These last two verses, let me read them: "Search me." He closes with this prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there be any offensive way in me and then lead me in the way everlasting." Look at the verbs, the action words he uses. Search me, Lord. Test me, Lord. Lead me, Lord.

This is going to be different this morning. But I would like for us to do this as a church, because I think that God healing back problems is just the scratch of what God wants to do. I believe signs and miracles and wonders he wants to perform right here in this local church. Tell everybody abroad that Jesus has risen from the dead and that he is alive! And I think that there are things in our life that are holding us back. And so, if you are daring enough with me this morning, I'd like for us to do this. I have little pieces of paper here this morning all across the chairs. If you want to, open your phone and use your notes. If you need a piece of paper or you don't have something to write with, just raise your hand and the ushers are going to bring you a piece of paper and a pen if you need one. Just raise your hand and leave it up and they'll help you. There's some people up front here. Here's what I want us to do. I want us to pray this prayer that David prayed this morning. And I want us to write three things on this piece of paper. Number one, I want us to pray, "Search me, God." Is there anything in my life that needs to go away? Is there anything that I am doing that I shouldn't be doing? Is there anything that I am speaking that I shouldn't be speaking? Is there any unforgiveness or bad attitudes that are in here, God? Because God searches the heart. And there may be things in you that are there, that you don't even see it. You're blinded to it. But God will reveal it. He will bring it to light. Jesus said, in John 16:15, this is what the Holy Spirit will do when He comes. He will reprove the world of sin and righteousness. He will lead us and guide us into all truth. So the first thing I want us to

write on this piece of paper, is there anything in my life that needs to change? Is there anything I need to repent of? And repent means to turn.

And the second thing I want to write on the paper is, what action do I need to take? What action, Lord? What do you want me to do about this sin in my life? This area in my life, this weakness in my life that you're showing me, this danger, this warning in my life. And it may not be about you. It may be about your family. Maybe something that you're allowing into your home. Maybe that snake that you let into your home. Maybe it's something that you're doing at work. Maybe it's something that you're contemplating with doing. Maybe there is a relationship with somebody at work that is coming on to you and maybe in your mind, you're entertaining, "What if? What if?" And the Holy Spirit is going to say to you, "You need to cut yourself off from that relationship. The devil is trying to use this to destroy your marriage, destroy your home."

So I want us to take a minute. Right now I want to just take a few moments, and I want everybody to bow your head and I want you to close your eyes. And if you're watching online, you can do this in your home or wherever you are. And I want you to ask the Holy Spirit right now. Holy Spirit of God, show me is there anything in my life that is not pleasing to you? Is there any area in my life where the devil can get in and destroy my walk with you? Is there anything that is keeping me from the favor and the anointing of God flowing in my life? Is there any sin I need to confess to you and I need to repent? Holy Spirit, will you just speak to us right now because you search the hearts? It's between you and God right now. This is a private moment. Holy Spirit of God, speak to us. Just show us, Lord. Just show us right now. I needed a bigger piece of paper when God started showing me things about myself. Holy Spirit, speak to us. Thank You. Thank you for the truth, because you know this truth is going to set you free. Now I want you to write down those things, and then let's ask the Lord this. What do you want me to do? Holy Spirit, what do you want me to do? What action can I take to turn from this sin, to keep this evil from me, from my marriage; from my children, from my finances, from my career, from my workplace? There is something, Lord, that I need to do that is keeping me from being the light in the dark place where I work. You call me to be the light. Is there somebody I need to speak to? Do I need to speak up on an issue? Do I need to act? If the Holy Spirit shows you something, if he gives you something, write it down. Write it down. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord. I know we're not jumping up and down and praising God this morning, but this is important. This is important!

If you're done, I want you to stand with me. Whenever you're done, just stand to your feet and I'll know we're all done. Thank you, God. Speak to our hearts. Search me, o Lord, and see if there be any wicked way in me. Know my heart. Lead me. Show me the way to everlasting life. Thank you, Holy Spirit of God. Thank you, Spirit of God. Here's what I'm going to ask us to do. I want you to bring that piece of paper symbolically this morning. I want you to bring it up here, and I want you just to lay it on the altar. Just leave your chair, just come up, and just lay it down. Just lay it down. Okay, God, I'm bringing this to you today. Symbolically I'm bringing this to you, Jesus. And we're going to pray. We're going to pray over all these revelations today. We're going to pray over them. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord. Thank you, Jesus. Holy Spirit of God, see the hearts of the people today, Lord. See their hearts. See their hearts. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Lord. If you're watching online, I want you to symbolically give that to God. Lay that somewhere before him right now. Just lay it before

him. He sees. He knows. It's your heart he is after. It's our heart he is after! See, God—if we give him our full heart, if we really give him our heart, all the junk, all the stuff—he'll wash us. He'll make us clean. He'll sanctify us. He will purify us. He will empower us with the Spirit. He will use us for His glory like we have never been used before. Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Jesus. This is not easy. This is very uncomfortable. A lot of you are uncomfortable. I am uncomfortable. Yes, Lord. God did not just give the gospel to comfort the afflicted but to afflict the comfortable. Amen. Now the worship team is going to come and we're going to pray. We're going to pray over all these requests. I want you to stretch your hands towards the altar with me.

Father, you see all the hidden things that are on these papers today, Lord, things that are on our hearts, things that your Holy Spirit has revealed to us that we need to change. And there is probably a lot more than what we wrote. And we ask your Holy Spirit to continually search our hearts. We ask for you to search us and keep us pure, Lord. Give us a hunger and thirst for righteousness. You said, Matthew 6:33, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." His righteousness, not ours, because ours is as filthy rags, but his righteousness—that's first. That's first priority. Seek you first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and everything else will be added unto to us. You said that. You said that, God. And we're holding that Word as truth in our lives today. And Father, I pray that you would look down, and you know what is written on every one of these pieces of paper. And I pray for every person represented on these pieces of paper, God. And I pray, we pray together, that you would help us. Come on, let's pray. Help us. Help me. Help me, Father. I can't do this by myself, but with you there is nothing I can't do. I can do all things through Christ. Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, is going to raise me up, is going to quicken my mortal body. The same Spirit that kept Jesus sinless is going to keep me from sin. You got to turn me from sin and unto you in righteousness, God. Lord, give us the power to overcome the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life. Give us the power of your Spirit to overcome addictions and things that we watch and see and hear and listen to and allow in our homes. Father God, we give you permission, the broom of the Holy Spirit, and sweep clean everything in our lives, Lord Jesus. We give you the keys to every room in the chamber our heart, that you will go in and clean us out, Lord. Lord, wash me and I shall be clean, Jesus. Do what we cannot do for ourselves. We need you, Jesus. We need you. Help us, Lord. Help us to act and to do. There are things that we wrote down on those pieces of paper that we feel you want us to do, and we need your help to do them. And we know, Lord, that you will give us the boldness to speak when we need to speak and the wisdom to not speak when we shouldn't speak, to know when to act, how to act, and what to do, to know what we need to say to the people in our lives that may be bringing curses to us instead of blessings. Lord, we want to be the light that you called us to be. You want us to be on fire, but there are these sticks on our pile that are soaked and wet with sin, and we ask you to dry them out and to burn them like chaff. We want to be ablaze for you. This church, [name of church], wants to be a blazing light Lord for you in this region. So we need you to deal with the stuff that's in our life that's hindering us. You put a wet piece of wood on a fire and it just produces smoke. There is no fire. We don't want to just produce smoke. We want to have the flame of God. We want to burn with passion for you, Jesus. We want to be on fire for you. Fire that provides light and leads people to Jesus. Thank you, thank you that you know us. Thank you that you're for us. Thank you that you're with us, that you've got us hemmed in. Thank you that you're

surrounding us. Thank you that there is not a place that we can go that you're not. Now Lord, help us to walk with gratitude and humility. Help us to walk with a jealousy for you, God, a righteous jealousy for your name. People will see Jesus is real. His life is in us. Let them see the truth. It will repel, it will repel some people away. But the enemies of God are our enemies. The enemies of God are our enemies. We know we're not fighting against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers and spiritual wickedness in high places. Father, we ask you to use us to cast them down. Use us as a church and as individuals, both collectively, corporately, and individually, Lord, to be your hands and to be your feet, to be your light, to dispel the darkness around us. We ask for your help. We thank you, Father, that you're going to help every person who wrote, those online and those on this altar, that you're going to help us, Lord, do what we need to do. In Jesus name, Amen.

Rebuke and Forgive (Luke 17:1-10) by "Pastor Noah"

So, I love the internet. How many of you are millennials, born after the year 1980, before 1995? Okay, several of you, okay? Now if you were that, you remember when the internet was first a thing? Gen Z doesn't. They're like, the internet has always been here, right? And so anybody born really after 1995, that's how they were because we remember...remember Windows 95? Remember that? Okay. So, I remember the internet and the internet has always been fascinating to me, but some of the most fascinating things right now to me on the internet is this thing called the Reddit AMA or Ask Me Anything. How many of you've heard of the Reddit AMA before? Okay. The Reddit AMA is a thing where people will get on Reddit, and they will say, "I am a blank. Ask me anything." So, some of my favorite ones that I've seen is, "I am a has-been rock star who sold 5 million records and I lost twice at the Grammys. Ask me anything." And you just go on there, and they're there for several hours, and you just ask everything. People like Bill Gates have done this. Barack Obama has done this. Here's another one. One guy said, "I am a seventy-four time Jeopardy champion, Ken Jennings. Ask me anything." I didn't read that one, but I hope he didn't answer in the form of a question. Another one said, "I saved a girl from drowning. Then her family sued me. Ask me anything." There's some fascinating Ask Me Anythings on Reddit.

This week, I engaged. There was a video of a church in the South that went viral this week, and I engaged on Reddit because I'm a pastor and I'm like, I gotta address this. So, I engaged it and it turned into "Ask Pastor Noah Anything." I didn't expect that to happen, but I had people asking me all this different stuff about miracles and about the Bible and about the church, and all this different stuff. And know what I discovered? People hate the church. People on the internet hate the church. I just saw this morning that LifeWay Research released a Barna study. They wrote an article about us, and for the first time ever in the history of the United States, the church and clergy are trusted less than ever before. Only 31% of people surveyed in the United States of America say, "I trust the church."

Folks, the church has a problem. And I'm convinced that the greatest—and here I am, a pastor in a local church saying this, hear me—I'm convinced that the greatest hindrance to the gospel is not Jesus Christ. But the greatest hindrance to the gospel is his people. It's his church. Because his church lacks the holiness of and his church lacks the character of Christ. The very person that it follows the church does not reflect. You guys tracking with me? So, Jesus in this text, he is rebuking the religious leaders. Chapter 16, we studied that eight weeks ago or so, right? I don't know if you remember it or not, but those sermons about generosity were hitting at the heart of the Pharisees that he was talking to. So, in the context of what Jesus is saying here, he's attacking the religious leaders. He's saying, "You Pharisees, you religious leaders, you're not doing it like God would have you do it." And then in in Chapter 17, what's it say? In the very, very first verse, the first part of that? It says, and he said to who? His disciples. So, he turns his attention away from the religious leaders and he starts talking to the very people that are following Him, the people that are supposed to look like Him, being the "little Christs" and here's the big idea for today that we're going to see in this entire text, verses 1 to 10. Jesus is after a church that actually looks like Him. You guys tracking with me? Jesus is after a church that looks like him. So, here's what we're going to see. In verses 1 to 2, we're going to see the Church has a problem and it's sin. The church has a problem.

He starts talking about these temptations to sin. In the Greek, this is a really cool word called *scandalon*, scandals, basically. But the Greek is often translated as "stumbling blocks" because what it literally means is "causes for stumbling." So, the picture is, let's say that you are on your journey in life and you're walking down this path and suddenly there's something that just gets slipped right in front of you and you trip over it and you fall down. That's a stumbling block. That's what Jesus is talking about here. Now here's the reality and I need you to hear this. On your Christian journey, you're just kind of walking through this life, you're going to face stumbling blocks along your journey. It is those are things that are hindrances to you. They are obstacles for you to face. They are temptations that want to draw you away from the path Jesus would want to have you walk.

All of us have our own proclivities. All of us have our own inner scandals happening that are going to draw us away one way or the other, and all of us, because we are wired certain ways by God, and sin then hijacked that wiring. We have certain proclivities to say, I'm going to go this way, or I'm going to go that way. James, Chapter 1 verse 14 actually says that you are drawn away and enticed by what? By your own desires. So, there's this internal drive in you that sin drives, that's going to take you one way or the other and it's going to cause you to trip up. So for me, it was certain things that I got into as a teenager and now, it's like if I see that stumbling block, I notice it and I recognize I got one or two choices there. I'm either going to choose to avoid it and resist. James Chapter 4 verse 7 says, "Submit to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." First Corinthians 10:13, it says, "There's no temptation that has overcome you, but He has provided a way out for you." So, when you see that stumbling block and you recognize that stumbling block, you can either resist it and avoid it or you're going to fall into it sinfully. That's the only two options. Because you will not just stop and stare at it. That's not how it's going to happen. You're either going to choose to avoid it, resist it, or you're going to fall into it sinfully. Jesus, what he's saying here in the Greek literally is these scandals literally cannot be avoided. They're going to come. These stumbling blocks are going to be there. So Christian, hear me. If you have given your life to Jesus, you've trusted Jesus as your Savior and Lord, I need you to hear me. On our Christian journey, you're going to face stumbling blocks. It's going to happen. Why? Because Jesus' church is not perfect. Jesus' church is full of imperfect people following one perfect Savior and because we are not perfect, we're going to mess up. We're going to drop stumbling blocks.

But look at what He says in this passage in the second part of verse one, He says, "But woe to the one through whom they come." This word "woe" is an interesting thing. It's a prophetic judgment. It's a pronouncement of pain. It's a pronouncement of displeasure. It is a state of distress and hardship. I don't know if you've ever wished on your worst enemies that they would have pain and suffering. But that's what this word "woe" means. And Jesus is saying here, if you were a person who drops stumbling blocks in front of other people, if you're a person whose lifestyle doesn't match the Savior that you profess, you're a person who's causing other people to stumble. And Jesus is saying, there is pain for you. There is hardship for you. It is promised to those who go around putting stumbling blocks on the path.

So, the question I ask—can I ask you a couple of questions on this? Number one, how bad is the hardship? Like what are we talking here? Like is it just kind of moments of just displeasure? Am I going to have a couple of bad days? Like, what's going to happen here? Well, what's Jesus say? He says it would be better for this person to do two things.

Number one, tie a big millstone around your neck. So, how much does a head weigh nowadays? Is it still around eight to ten pounds? Your neck is designed to carry what? Your head, get this. A millstone and what Jesus probably had in mind was an olive press. Like we think of gristmills or grain mills around here, that's not what we're talking about. An olive press was basically a big round stone that was about three thousand pounds with a smaller millstone on it. And what you could do is you could grab the stick that was going through the millstone that was shaped kind of like a doughnut, and you would walk around the bigger stone and as you did that the olives would be pressed and crushed, and the oil would flow into the center catch basin. That's probably what Jesus is talking about. Now this millstone is probably around seven to eight hundred pounds. So, it takes a couple of hefty dudes to move this thing. And Jesus says, the first thing, it would be better for you to tie that around your neck. Can you imagine your neck now supporting seven to eight hundred pounds? Not very comfortable, is it? Then, he says, go jump into the sea. What's going to happen? Down to the bottom you go. Your lungs will slowly fill with water. You're going to drown. You're going to eventually slowly get to the point if the sea is deep enough. By the way, divers don't go below three hundred thirty feet for a reason without protective gear. Because if you start getting below that, the pressure of the water around you will actually cut our circulatory system off before it ever starts crushing you. Like it begins to be so pressurized in the ocean that your blood literally cannot flow. Your heart can't pump hard enough for that to happen. Jesus, being the Creator of the universe knows all of this, and he says if you are a person who puts stumbling blocks in front of people, it would be better for you to tie that millstone around your neck and jump into the sea and have all of that weight crushing you than to face the judgment that's coming. That does not sound pleasant to me. But that's what Jesus says to us.

The picture that Jesus is painting is not pretty. And I ask the question, why would He be so harsh? Why would the Savior of the universe, the benevolent and all good God, why would He say something so harsh? And the question is, we gotta ask, what's at stake? And he says this here, he says, "For you to be cast in the sea than he should cause one of these little ones to sin." Now, in the New Testament, the word for little ones usually is spoken of children but it's also really telling us about the spiritually immature, those who are spiritual babies as Christians, like they just came to faith, and they are just starting this journey or maybe it's someone who doesn't have the mental capacity. These little ones, just call it that, it's that all encompassing thing about children and immature Christians and all these different things.

Here's the reality that I know, because I'm a new dad, right? My daughter's two, and I know that she is listening to everything that I say, and she's watching everything that I do. I know as I'm reading this, and Jesus says it's better for you to do that than to cause a little one to stumble. I know how impressionable my two-year-old is and Jesus himself is saying, no, listen! It is better for you to suffer really, really, really badly than to cause an impressionable person spiritually to sin and to go off into the wrong path. God cares so much about those people that He promises hardship to those who cause them to stumble.

Now, I need to pause looking at the text, and I need to address something that recently happened in our network of churches. Remember that study I told you about where now only 31% of the people do it? Do you know when the highest level of trust for clergy and churches was? The year 2000. The year 2000, about 95% of people said yes, I trust the church and I trust the clergy. Then, the year 2000 happened and the Boston Globe

released a lot of articles about the Catholic clergy sex abuse scandal. And the numbers started declining. Then, in 2019, the Houston Chronicle published a six-part article on seven hundred abuse victims that had been overlooked in Southern Baptist churches. Our church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Network. I want to tell you that that autonomy—which is like there's no structure above us, we don't have a diocese telling us what to do, all those different things—that is both our greatest strength and our greatest weakness. It's our greatest strength because we can follow Jesus. We can read the Bible and do what He says. But it's our greatest weakness because there's often no accountability for what our church does. And what happened in some of these churches, maybe it was a volunteer youth pastor that committed abuse or maybe it was their pastor. Some of these churches were very small, forty, fifty people and these things happened. And those churches said, "Well, well we don't want our church to hit the national news." So, these churches just fired their pastors quietly and just chose to not say anything. Well, here's the problem. The executive committee of the entire convention caught wind of all of this, and they did nothing. Because they wanted to quote "protect the mission." Because after all, there's a lot of dollars flowing to the mission field through the International Mission Board and the North American Mission Board.

Last year in 2021, at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting, all of the messengers got together, and they said, not only do we want to know but we want to know everything because we can't fix it if we don't know everything that happened. The Southern Baptist Annual meeting is going to be in Dallas next year. If you are a member of [name of church], you can go as a messenger, and vote at that meeting, any one of you. So last year, all of the messengers said, no more. That will not happen again in Southern Baptist Churches again. We will not cover it up. We need to know everything. So, they voted at the meeting that the executive committee of our convention would waive attorney-client privilege so that everything would be on record. Well, obviously, the people who had either committed the abuse or covered for the abusers were fighting that. So they all quit, and we went forward and waived attorney-client privilege and this spring, a report was released. I was angry at what I read. It broke my heart, and it broke the heart of God. But I'm pleased to report to you that three weeks ago at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting there were three things that happened. Number one, moving forward, any church that covers up abuse is no longer in friendly cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention. They're kicked out. Number two, a recurring task force was established, and they are creating programs and resources on how to bring justice to and healing to those who have been abused.

I just want to say, quick note, if you are an abuse survivor, this church, me as your pastor, and all those people around you stand with you. We pray God's healing over you, and we pray that God will get justice for you. And I'm not talking just justice of sending your abuser to a place where they will deal with God's wrath but I'm saying justice here. You deserve it. You were terribly wronged, and God sees you and we see you. I want you to know that.

As well, what I am most excited about is like I said, autonomy is our greatest strength and weakness. Often what happened was these pastors just kind of left quietly and then they ended up working in other churches and nobody said anything about their past and everything else. That will not happen again because now. Any pastor or leader—and I'm not talking just pastor, I'm talking all the way down to all group leaders—any pastor or

leader who is credibly accused in a Southern Baptist Church will be listed on a Ministry Check website which is essentially the church equivalent of a sex offender database. They will be listed there, and churches when they hire a new person can go on that website and check and see if this person is credibly accused. And I praise God for those actions. That was the right step to make. Now, I mentioned the church is not painless, it's not clean, but I believe Jesus is calling us as churches and this church especially—I can't control any other, any other church than this one—this church will pursue a pure church. We will pursue being a church that actually looks like Jesus. Now, I've only gone through the first two verses of this text, and I've burned through half of my sermon time, alright? We need to, we need to continue on. If you have any other questions about any of that, if you're watching online and you have questions, you can email me, go to our website and contact us there, or if you're here in the room and you're like, I've got questions, Pastor, I would, I'm going to be open and clear about all of that and I would love to meet with you at some point and discuss that with you.

Alright, moving on. The second thing that we see in this text in verses 3 and 4 is that God gave us a pathway to actually remedy the problem and it's through the practice of what's known as church discipline, alright? Look at what He says in verses 3 and 4. He says, you need to watch yourself. Okay, let me just say this. Ready? Not a single person in this room is exempt from falling off into sin, myself included. So, Jesus first, looking at his disciples, he says, you better watch yourself because you're not exempt from doing the same thing these religious leaders are doing. You need to watch yourself. Be on guard. You must be spiritually self-aware. Ask yourself a couple questions. Number one, how are you tempted to stray? When are you tempted to stray? What are you tempted to stray by? And get this, are you accountable to other people? Because healthy Christians invite accountability. Are you healthy? Are you inviting people to hold you accountable to doing the things that Jesus has called you to do? Because in first Peter 5:8 it says, "Be sober minded and be watchful. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." He's coming after you! He's sending demons to come after you and Jesus is telling you, be on guard. Watch for it so that you know when it's coming. But then He says to do this crazy thing. He says, if you see a brother who has sinned, rebuke them. Rebuke your brother who has sinned, the one who has caused offense and the one who has caused other people to stumble. What he's saying in this passage is he's saying, even though he's pronouncing woe to them, that woe is only applicable if they're unrepentant. He's saying like, no one is too far gone from the grace and love of God. God can redeem sin no matter how serious it might be. Now, it doesn't mean that the consequences of that sin are null and void. They're always going to be consequences to the actions we take, but what He's saying is you are called as God's people to rebuke the one who is laying the stumbling blocks.

Now, what is a rebuke? It is a stern, serious warning. It is an admonishment and it's usually directed at behavior, not identity. You're not rebuking the person. You're rebuking the actions. Because Jesus alone is the one who can rebuke the person. You're rebuking the actions. Basically what you're saying, that you've committed sin and this sin is leading you down this path. You may not be able to see it because sin blinds you, and you are walking down this path and we want to help you be healthy. Now, why is this important? Doesn't the Holy Spirit indwelling in a believer convict of sin? Doesn't the Holy Spirit draw these people back? And I want you to hear this, the Spirit of God is always going to use the people

of God to accomplish the work of God in the world. The Spirit of God is going to use the people of God to accomplish the work of God in the world. That means holding one another accountable for the sin that we've committed. Are you accountable? So, I want to tell you this. This was really hard for me even. If a fellow believer comes to you and they show you in the Scriptures where the behavior that you have done is out of line with the gospel that you profess to believe, then you need to listen to and respond as if it's Jesus himself saying that to you. Because what I know to be true, even of myself, is it's really easy to blame shift. And it's really easy to defend and it's really easy to do all of that. But if it's clear in the Word of God, and the Word of God says, "Don't do that," and you've done that thing, you need to repent of that.

But then the third thing, here's what's interesting. He says that you are called to forgive conditionally. What's it conditioned upon? Their repentance. He says if they repent, forgive them. If they repent, forgive them. In the context, what forgiveness means here, the Greek word that means to stop blaming or to stop taking an offence on their account. What you're saying is, it's done. We're moving on. By the way, if you bring it up again in conflict, you haven't actually forgiven. You're saying it's done. Forgiveness is conditional upon their repentance and the third thing I want you to see in verses 4 to 6 is it actually takes really, really deep faith to do that. Because what if they don't repent? What if they don't? Because here's the thing, repentance is not just saying I'm sorry. The fruit of repentance is the change, the actions that come out of that. What if they never change their actions? Look at what Jesus said. He said, if this person comes to you seven times a day and they said to you, "I repent," forgive them. And here's the truth. Me and you are not the repentance police. You and I are not the ones who get to judge their repentance is true or not. That's God's work alone. If this person comes to you and they simply say—but Jesus, I need to see the fruit of repentance before I forgive them. And Jesus is telling us, leave that to me. That's my work, not your work. You see, here's what I know to be true of my work, if someone rebukes me, is to repent. God's work is to send his Spirit to convict me, draw me, and enable that repentance. The person who rebuked me, their job simply is to rebuke and forgive, that's it. I'm convinced that sometimes God is waiting to work in some relationships because He's waiting for the person to actually trust him enough that he's going to do the work in their life. That's really, really hard.

Then verses 5 and 6 seem out of context in this place. And they look at Jesus and they're like, "Give us more faith." Then Jesus uses this illustration of a mulberry tree. A mulberry tree has huge, deep root systems. If you have a mulberry tree, you better watch your foundation because the mulberry tree's roots will actually upend in the soil so much that it will destroy the foundation of the house that's built near it. What Jesus is telling them in the context of all these verses is faith has great power that can do the impossible in relationships. So, if you're in a situation where someone near you is that person that just keeps putting stumbling blocks in your path—by the way, preaching to myself in all this, just so you know—Jesus is telling us even the smallest faith in the relationship can solve the problem. Rebuke it and trust him. Like his disciples, we're praying that God will increase our faith.

And then verses 7 to 10. Here's the final thing I want you to see is that Jesus alone is going to dictate the practice of his church. Confronting someone else's sin is really uncomfortable. Because there's never going to be a time that you confront somebody else's sin that you are also not sinning, okay? Like you're always going to be sinful. There's always

going to be something in the back of your closet that you don't want found out when you go to talk to somebody else. So just remember, Jesus' church is only as pure as we are repentant. And so, we are called to repent. We are called to walk blamelessly with the Lord, but you're never going to be sinless. Only Jesus is sinless. It's really uncomfortable to rebuke other people's sin. It's really uncomfortable to confess your sin to another person. It's really uncomfortable, let's just be honest. It would be a lot easier if we just ignored it all. It would just be so much more pleasant. If we saw someone else that we go to church with in sin, and we just said, "I will let God handle that, we're just going to move on," it would be a lot easier to do that! But that's not what Jesus is telling us to do.

And then He tells this passage, this story about a servant, and this word in the Greek is called *doulos* and it means to be a slave. A *doulos* is someone who is in debt and in order in those days to pay off your debt, you would then go be a slave of the person who you were in debt to until you worked enough to pay off your debt. So, maybe you've got a credit card from Chase Bank. Well, you're a *doulos*, you're a slave to Chase Bank. So, you show up and you're like, "I'm going to wash your windows today," or "I'm going to do whatever," and that's what you would do to those creditors and debtors. A *doulos* was a bond servant. They were obligated to do what they were told. So, Jesus tells the story, and he says, listen, at no time is the master going to say to someone who works in the field all day, there's a list of things that you've gotta do. You work in the field, you cook dinner, you serve dinner, you clean up after dinner—that's your list of things. This guy comes in after working in the field all day. Dinner hasn't even been served yet. Dinner hasn't been fixed yet. Jesus is not going to look at the *doulos* or the slave and say, "You worked in the field. Have a seat, take a load off." It's not what he does. He says, "Why are you sitting down? Dinner needs to be fixed. Go wash up. Go clean yourself. Get ready for dinner. Serve dinner and then clean up after dinner." That's what you've gotta do. That's our obligation. No time is Jesus going to let you off.

So, the Christian response to all of this, after you rebuke sin and they repent, you're not going to go, "Yay! You repented of your sin. That is so good! I'm so proud of you!" No! You're supposed to repent of your sin! Like, you don't look at what someone is supposed to do as a Christian and go, "Oh, you're so special. I'm so glad you did that!" Likewise, we don't look at someone who finally forgave someone and go, "Yay! You forgave that person!" What Jesus here is, "No, that's what you're obligated to do." The response is in verse 10. So, you disciples, you've done all you were commanded. By the way, you were commanded to rebuke sin. You are commanded to forgive. You are commanded to repent. When you've done all that you are commanded, you say, "We are unworthy servants. We have only done what was our duty."

It's very uncomfortable to look at that and be called unworthy servants, because in the Greek it literally means "useless slaves." We are useless slaves. "Useless" in the Greek means to produce little or no profit or gain. Because here's the reality, as Americans in the, whatever, 21st century, I guess we're still in, in our pride, we get offended. When if someone tells us that we're not special, we get offended. Because we have an entire generation that got participation trophies. "Yay, you showed up to practice! Here's a trophy for that." In our culture, whenever we hear Jesus say, "No, no, no, you simply do what you're obligated to do and no one's going to actually celebrate that," that offends us. And really what this passage is teaching is we get to a place where we say, "Jesus, this is your

church. You do with it what you want to do with it. It's yours. And you alone have the privilege of calling all the shots." So, here's what He's saying in this passage.

Let's sum all this up. Number one, stumbling blocks are inevitable. They're going to come. Get ready for them. Number two, if you have caused other people to stumble and you are not repentant of that, you have not turned from that, and corrected that, get ready for that prophetic woe to settle over you. Number three, if we bear the responsibility toward one another to rebuke sinful behavior and call them to repent, God is glorified in that. And number four, when they repent, we forgive every time. We forgive every single time. In [name of church], that pursuit of a pure church, that looks like Jesus. That's a church that looks like Jesus. So, I pray that you would have the humility to repent when someone rebukes you. I pray that we would lay down our pride in front of Jesus, recognizing that we ourselves are not pure, holy people apart from the work of the Holy Spirit and the work of Jesus on the cross in our lives, that his grace alone is what carries us through to holiness. And that we are in pursuit of that holiness, because we want our daily lives to look like Jesus, and then if you got a bunch of people who in their daily life look like Jesus, and then they come together, that will look like Jesus. So, I pray that you, individually this week, decide, I want to live my life in a way that looks like Jesus. Jesus is after a church that looks like him because Jesus himself is the one who forgave us. Jesus Himself is the one who died in our place and Jesus himself is the one who took our penalty.

God's Patience and Kindness (Matthew 18:10-35) by "Pastor Omar"

If I think back to my own times in which I have seen what the Lord has done—whether it is in a sunset or a sunrise, whether it's in nature, or whether the beauty that comes through God's creation, or in a sanctuary seeing people pray—there are times in which God gives us the ability to recognize his presence in our midst in a way that we perhaps haven't before. Does that make sense? And the question that comes when we see those kinds of thing is, is that always there and God just gives us the eyes to see it? Or is it unique? Has it not been there before? Is it a unique appearance of God? And I think both are true. There are times the sunset—like the sunset isn't always the sunset, right? It doesn't always look as pretty. Sometimes you can't see the sunset. It depends on what's going on. Last night as we were out on our deck, and I gazed up and got to see the stars. I was taken by how beautiful it is and how vast our creation is, this creation that we live in that the Lord has created for us. But the thing is, that those stars are always there, aren't they? They are always there for me to observe. The sunset may not be there every time, but there is always a sunset, at least as long as I can remember there being a sunset. And there has always been a sunrise. Every day that I ever remember there is one, even if I wasn't up to see it, or even if I wasn't paying attention. And I think that periodically as we gaze through the Scriptures and we look at what God has for us, we will see just glimpses of the goodness and the love and the grace and the mercy of God coming through that helps us to understand our everyday experience in more powerful ways.

That fits in very well with the sermon series what we have been looking at, which is the fruits of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self control. I believe that all of the fruits of the Spirit that we exhibit and pour out to others is a reflection of what God has done for us, that these fruits of the Spirit, that we are to display towards others or have available to give to others, are things that God has in abundance given to us. So if you open your Bible to the 18th chapter of the book of Matthew, we will start our sermon today reading from Matthew 18:10. We are going to look at how God is both patient and kind towards us. One of the passages that I'm about to read will probably sound very similar to you. You've probably used it and quoted it out of context perhaps many times. In fact I, when I first understood what the passage was about, I changed my mind all the time what it was about all the time. And you'll understand more clearly as I read Matthew 18 starting with verse 10, and this is the word of the Lord [Scripture reading.] This is God's Word.

That last verse, verse 20, is the one that we perhaps unintentionally, and I'm not even sure it's that bad a thing, but we sort of take that verse out of context. I have heard it said multiple times, especially when we have some gatherings and a few people come up and say, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with you." Well that is true, and it's a good thing, but one of my professors of the New Testament said that every time someone were to quote that verse, he would duck because this is a passage is essentially about church discipline, and it says essentially that wherever two or three are gathered together in my name for the purposes of ratifying church discipline, I am there with you, I am witnessing the whole thing. So he said that "every time two or three are gathered together, there is a greater likelihood that I am the one being disciplined."

What I find very interesting is how this passage works together. And sometimes we're guilty of what I would call atomizing the Bible. And here is what I mean about that.

One of the things that modern technology has given to us, which is a blessing, is the ability to look at certain sections of passages of Scripture, perhaps to have verses of the day that we can memorize or we can look to. And those are all good things. It's better to be able to memorize a verse of the day than not to memorize any verse at all. It's better to look at one passage a day than to look at no passages a day. The unintended gray cloud to that silver lining, so to speak, is that when we look at Scripture in isolation from the rest of the context of the passage, we don't get to see some of the beauty that God has for us. To again steal Paul's analogy, if he were to take one picture of one leaf on one tree and that beautiful picture that he painted for us, then he would not have been given the ability to see the totality of the view that God was offering him. Does that make sense? Instead, he had to have the right perspective, to look at it in the right way to consider that entire picture together in such a right way so that when he took the picture and he looked back at it, the whole thing was a work of beauty and not just a single leaf. Well, if this passage is like the leaves on those trees, as he took a picture of that, it reminded him of it, it gave him a glimpse into how it all worked together to give him a story of God's glory. And what I'm going to argue is that this passage together works like a complete picture with each passage being a leaf on a tree that gives us a picture of one of the most incredible things about God, which is his patience and his kindness.

And to introduce that concept a little bit, let me introduce something that is theological, something doctrinal that is very important, and that is that religion seeks to do things in order to earn God's kindness and patience. Does that make sense? Religion has an image of God, a caricature of God that looks down upon humanity and says, if you will do these things, and you will say these prayers, and you will attend services often enough, and you will do these specific rituals, then I will love you and I will be patient with you and I will forgive you. And that just is not what the Bible teaches about God's patience and God's kindness. I'm going to say that again because it is very important. Religion teaches us that religion is about earning God's patience and his kindness and tells us that if we do these things, and pray these prayers, and go to church often enough, and give enough, and do enough of these things and participate enough in the life of church ministry, and engage in all these programs, then God will love us, he will be patient with us, and he will forgive us, and he will be kind to us. And it's just a lie. It isn't how God works.

It has to do with the parable of the lost sheep that I just told you in Matthew 18:10, which reminds us that God leaves the ninety-nine, who were doing exactly the right thing, leaves them, in order to seek and save the one who has gone astray. God did not come or send his Son in order to congratulate or placate those who believe that they're doing the right thing. God sent his Son in order to seek and save that which was lost. To find those who were sinners, running from God, mired in their sin, in order that He might find them, rescue them, place them back upon his shoulder and bring them home.

And there's two aspects to that the rest of the Scripture kind of fleshes out, specifically about God's patience and his kindness and in 2 Peter 3:8, we understand God's patience and what it's all about. Second Peter 3:8 says this, "But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." That reminds me of a joke that I heard. There was a young boy that was praying to the Lord and he said, "God I know that to you a million dollars is but a single penny and a thousand years but a single minute." And so the young boy said to the Lord, "Lord might I have a million dollars?" And God said "Sure, give me a minute." Do you get it? The idea is

that God has so much planned for us, but God is not slow in fulfilling his promises, as some count slowness. But it sure feels that way, doesn't it? I don't know about you, but as the world spins and as the world turns and things go the way they're going, it seems like the world's a bigger mess today than it was ten years ago, and a bigger mess ten years ago than it was one hundred years ago. And maybe that's just a pessimistic look at things. And there are things that give me hope as well, but there are times in which I'm just ready for Jesus to come. I don't know about you. Is anybody ready? It's like tomorrow would be fine. If he were to come before this sermon ends, I wouldn't miss the rest of the sermon. I just wouldn't and neither should you. But the reason why God leaves us here in this mess, he is not slow in fulfilling his promises. It's not as if he's withholding something good for us simply because He's like "Well I'll just get to it when I get to it." No, the reason why God leaves us in this mess is because of his patience.

"The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness, but He is patient towards you not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and the heavenly bodies will pass away with a roar, the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed." Now, it's time for us to pay a little bit of close attention to what that passage says. The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness, but he is patient towards you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. There is probably at least two ways in which that passage can be rightly understood. Because he is patient towards us, he is patient towards you, with his understanding that everyone who is a recipient of Peter's letter maybe thought they were a Christian, but weren't. Because there is such a thing as a person who has been to church for years, maybe even being the vast majority of their life, and they thought that even by virtue of being associated with a particular church, that meant that they were a legit Christian. And, to sound a little southern, it ain't true. I have spent some time in the south. And I have been to churches in the south. And I have asked lots of people in the south, what is it about this church? What is it that God is teaching you through this church? Describe to me your relationship with God. And I have heard, on more than one occasion, "Well, my daddy was a preacher, and my daddy's daddy was a preacher and my great, great-granddaddy was a preacher, and we've known this church." Well you haven't told me anything about Jesus yet! What does it mean for you to have a personal relationship with Jesus? None of that has anything to do with whether or not you have a genuine relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. You with me?

And honestly, that's one of the things I worry about. Not only for our church, but for most churches. If you were to listen in and been given the opportunity to listen in to the majority of conversations before church and after church, people talk a whole lot about church. But test me on this. Almost nobody is talking about Jesus. Test me out. Listen to the conversations before any church, our church included, and you'll hear a lot of church talk. What's going on in the church, what are the problems in the church, what do we do about the church—lots of church talk, almost no Jesus talk. Don't confuse church talk with Jesus talk. They're not the same. Jesus talk is what is God doing in your life lately? What lessons has the Lord been teaching you as you sit at his feet, listening to his Word? How is your heart changing by virtue of your time of study? See there's a whole lot of horse and cart problems in evangelical Christianity today, where we put the cart before the horse. Jesus came to establish the church in order that we might be the vehicle to teach everything that

he commanded. The church is there to lift up the Word and the works of Jesus Christ! Can I get an Amen from a Baptist Church? The church is not here to self-perpetuate. It's not. At no point in time did Jesus ever give us the mandate to keep a church organizationally or financially healthy. Not one place in the Bible does it ever say that. Not one! Now you can do with that what you want, theologically, but I see a whole lot of places in the Bible where Jesus commands his disciples to go make disciples and tell other people about what He has done and what He has said. You all with me? God is patient towards us!

Why is He patient towards us? Because, we have been given a commission. We have been given a goal. We've been given a command to go make disciples of all nations. The reason that God has left us in this mess is not so that we can look up to heaven and go, "When are you coming back? We'll just stand here and wait here until you come." No, he is patient with us so we can do the work that he gave us to do! Because he does not want any to perish but come to repentance. The way that God has chosen for other people to hear about him is for us to tell them! You all with me? And then he gives us this warning that the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will pass away with a roar. Then the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved and the earth and the work that are done on it will be exposed. God is patient towards us, so that we can do what it is that He has called us to do for the people who desperately need to hear Jesus and for whom God's patience currently rests. And God is kind towards us. Romans 2:1-5 tell us that clearly. [Scripture reading.] That is one of those passages that just reminds us that we are not that much better than the rest of the world that we seek to condemn on a pretty regular basis. You presume to cast judgment on people but you kind of do the same thing. And why do you presume on God's kindness?

Don't you realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? You see the heart of God is just revealed. We're given a glimpse, a picture like a sunset or like perfect winter scene of God's kindness and his patience in the parable of the lost sheep. God did not stay with the ninety-nine and make sure they were comfortable. He left them in order that He might find the one who was lost. And the trick of humility is to ask ourselves who are we in that passage. You're not Jesus. Only Jesus is Jesus, right? So that leaves us two options. If you're one of the ninety-nine, I don't think that you need any help, which according to that passage isn't exactly a great place to be in. Or, you see yourselves as one of the ones who have gone astray. And you look up from the busyness of your life and you say, "Lost." And I'm just going to say something that might sound a tad shocking. But if you can't remember a time in which you were there, then you probably are there now. If you can't remember a time that you looked up and said, "I am totally lost," then you are probably still lost.

Now I'm one of those people who has an absolutely awful sense of direction. Can I get an "Amen" from anybody else? There are some people who have inherited a natural sense of direction, but not me. When I lived out west, things were a lot easier, because the mountains were always west, and the mountains were taller than literally everything else, and so I always knew where west was and that helped me to calibrate things. And then I came to New England and I literally lost my mind for about four months. I never knew where I was, ever! Because of all these trees that you have, right. There are so many, and sometimes you can't see the sun, so you don't know. And even if you can see the sun, you don't know which way is east or which way is west. There are times in which I'm lost and I know I'm lost. And at least I know that I'm lost. But what frustrates me more than anything

is to be lost and not know that I'm lost. You with me? Spiritually you are in a much better place if you look up and you go I know that at one point in time, "I was totally lost. I know it. And then Jesus found me and brought me back." That's a good story to have. If you don't have that story, you're lost, and you don't know it. It's the kindness of God that says that I will leave it all, I'll leave it all, to find that one. That's the heart of God that informs the next part of the passage.

Matthew 18:10-14 tells us about the patience of God's kindness towards us. Matthew 18:15-20 tells us about the way in which, after we've come to recognize that and experience and internalize it, how that makes a difference in us so that we are patient towards others and kind towards others. And the problem is I've heard this next passage preached exactly antithetical, completely 180 degrees opposite from what came before it. There is the patience of God, who leaves those who think they are righteous in order to find the one who is lost. Then in verse 15 we read [Scripture reading].

So here's how we've done that. "Somebody harmed me, so I'm going to go talk to him. Well he didn't listen, so I'm going to bring a couple more people. Well he didn't listen, so I'm going to bring it before the church, and were going to bring the hammer of justice, the church's hammer of justice down upon them. And then we're going to let them out and treat them as sinners and tax collectors, whom Jesus despised." Right? But wait, my Bible doesn't say that Jesus despised sinners and tax collectors. My Bible says that He ate with them and made one his disciple.

So, if we get to the conclusion and we realize that this passage reads harsher than what is consistent with the previous passage, then maybe we just have it wrong. If your brother sins against you then go tell him his fault between you, him and him alone. And one of the things that Ken has brought to my attention is the nuance of that text. It doesn't say go with a harsh, condemning, self-righteous, other condemning attitude. It says go tentatively to your brother and be willing to hear him or her out. The reason that you go to your brother is—in a spirit of humility, meekness, and patience, hoping that you can turn that person away from the sin that has impacted you—with a goal of getting right with that person. Not just following the steps and checking the boxes so that you can eventually just chuck them out the church. "And if he listens to you, you have gained your brother." Doesn't that sound like the parable of the lost sheep? If he listens, then a lost one has been returned.

"But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you that every charge may be established by the evidence of more than two or three witnesses." Well, why two or three witnesses? Maybe you should bring two or three others with you, because maybe you could be mistaken. Because bringing two or three others along with you gives you a chance to get a little perspective on the matter. Because, as much as it's hard for us to admit, you could be the problem, or maybe part of the problem. Maybe the problem you have with someone else isn't them. Maybe it's you. Because it's arrogant to assume that your perspective is the only valid perspective on the matter. And that's why there are a whole host of passages in the Bible that talk about having two or three witnesses. Deuteronomy 19:15: "A single witness should not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established." Second Corinthians 13:1: "This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses." First Timothy 5:19: "Do not admit a charge against an

elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses." Are you picking up a pattern? It's all the way through. Because two or three witnesses give us the opportunity to do a lot of things. It gives us the opportunity to sit with the wisdom of two or three other people who have a different perspective on the matter, who can say, "You know what, yeah, that person really hurt you, but some of the things you've been doing haven't been very helpful." And let me tell you in the seventeen years that I've been involved in any pastoral counseling, maybe one time in those seventeen years have I seen a situation where maybe one person held a grudge against another person and one person was one hundred percent at fault. That has maybe happened once. Every other time, both of them bring a little dysfunction to the relationship.

And if that doesn't suffice, we bring it to the church, so that the whole church can bring down the hammer of justice, right? Wrong. You bring it to the church, so that in the counsel of many people, they can help adjudicate the matter, because this is a family. You bring it to the church so they can bring their resources of wisdom and grace and their mercy on the matter so that everyone can be right and the church can once again take the minor things that cause so much conflict and de-prioritize them, so that we can all together lock arms and do the work of the ministry.

And if that doesn't happen, you treat them like a sinner and a tax collector, which means that you tell them they can't come to church anymore, cause we don't like sinners and tax collectors in our church? Even though Jesus did. And the early church was built with sinners and tax collectors as their primary audience. And it was the Pharisees who were the most embarrassed about his affiliation with the sinners and tax collectors, and Jesus was never embarrassed about his affiliation with sinners and tax collectors. So what's the purpose of treating them like sinners and tax collectors? So here's the thing, if you go through all that and you still have a person who is not penitent—they're just lost. They don't know Jesus. So what do you do with sinners and tax collectors if they don't know Jesus? Well, you tell them the gospel. That doesn't mean that there aren't times in which we don't have to exit people or treat them as if they are not part of the gathered body of saints. There have been times in the history of our church and we've had to do it, and every time it's broken my heart. Every single time! And I'm not even saying we've done it right every time. But there's something about us getting offended personally that makes us lose a little perspective. It keeps us from seeing passages of Scripture in a way that really apply to us.

One of them is 1 Thessalonians 5:13. "And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all." First Thessalonians 5 says for those people who know what they ought to be doing but they're just not doing it, you admonish them for their own good. And that can sound a whole lot like, "Brother I love you and I care for you and I am invested in you and I want what's best for you. And you're not doing what you should be doing. And so I am asking you, as a brother to another brother, to reconsider your behavior or your beliefs or your actions." How many people would not respond to that with at least a little bit of consideration, right? Encourage the fainthearted. There are people that just need encouragement. They don't need you to talk about them. They don't need you to look down on them. They just need your help; they need you to be encouraging towards them. And there are weak people that need help. Maybe it is to come alongside them and help bear their burdens, right? Isn't that what Galatians 6:5 says? [Scripture reading.] If you see someone else do something you think they ought not to be doing, then go to them to restore them in a spirit of gentleness, right?

But here's what we do sometimes in a church. We don't admonish the idle. We just write Facebook posts about him. We don't encourage the fainthearted. We just insult them or believe the worst about them. We don't help the weak. We just shoot them. None of it looks at all like the parable of the lost sheep. It just doesn't. And one of the saddest things is people who come to church expecting to hear the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ and be able to fall in love with it, and they get involved with church politics. And I've had people leave churches—other churches and our church. And I just say politics is too thick, too much. I kind of expected something different. And if you don't think you've been part of it, maybe ask God to search your heart, because I know I sure have.

The last parable that Jesus tells brings it home. It illustrates the hypocrisy that we are all tempted towards. In Matthew 18:21 Jesus said, [Scripture reading]. Now one of the problems, the impact of that passage is lessened by the fact that we do not know what a talent is, and we don't really understand what the denarii is. So let me help you understand. A talent was a glass, a potter's jar about this wide and probably about waist high. It was filled with coins or silver, anything precious. Each one would have been worth five to six years worth of wages to the average person. The Bible says ten thousand talents. If you're going to make a wild guess as to how much money the servant owed his master in today's dollars, it would be the equivalent of about six billion dollars. That's how much that servant owed his master, and the debt was forgiven. A denarius was worth probably about a week or two of wages. One hundred denarii is worth about fifteen hundred dollars in today's money, still not a small amount. So the servant goes to the master and he says, "Please have patience with me, I promise I'll pay back the six billion," right? And the master forgives him all of that debt. And that wicked servant goes to another servant and says, "You best pay me that fifteen grand right now." You see that hypocrisy. See, that's the hypocrisy that you and I are tempted towards all the time. The cross that we see before us is that perfect picture. It's that snapshot that we get to see of God's patience and his kindness. The amount of debt that you and I owed a Holy God by our transgressions is infinite. And God through the cross has forgiven us all that debt. And yet it's so easy for us to nurse a grudge between another of our brothers and sisters in Christ. It's too easy. Maybe you have one right now. Maybe there is someone you have not yet forgiven.

Now, listen, I already know what you might be thinking because I have thought the same thing. "They don't deserve forgiveness." Well nobody does! "But they have a pattern of blah, blah." But so do you! "But, you don't know how hard it must be." I just know that it was about five billion times harder for God to release your sin towards him, given that He is holy and perfect. And yet God did not spare his only Son, the good shepherd, to find us, the lost ones, to bring us back on his shoulders. And the cost of it was the cost of his own life, the shedding of blood, that we might be fully and finally forgiven of all our sin. And you can say, "Well, they haven't asked for forgiveness." Yup, that just doesn't matter. I'm sorry, it just doesn't. Turn with me to the second chapter of the book Colossians, 2:13: "And you"—anytime the Bible says and you, you should say, "That's me"—"were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our trespasses." When did he do that? When you were dead in your trespasses. "While you were still dead in your trespasses, and in the uncircumcision of your flesh God made you alive together with Him, having forgiven your trespasses." How? By canceling the record of death that stood against us with the legal demands. This He set aside nailing it to the cross. Now follow my logic. For how many of you did the cross of

Jesus Christ precede your asking God for forgiveness? That would be all of you, right? Unless you're really, really old, right? Every single one of you had the cross of Jesus Christ and the forgiveness that was purchased on that cross precede your asking for forgiveness. Are you with me?

Now go to Colossians, Chapter 3, verses 12 and 13. "Put on then as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, bearing with one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other." Here's the ticket, here's the hinge, here's the rub: "As the Lord has forgiven you, you must also forgive." For us, our confession did not come before God's forgiveness. God nailed every transgression that you ever had to a cross, before you even thought about asking for forgiveness. For God, forgiveness for us came first. That doesn't mean we don't have to ask for it, that doesn't mean we don't have to approach God with a sense of humility. It just means that God released from us, on our account, all guilt, by nailing it to the cross, while we were still disobedient to Him and enemies of the cross. God stood far away and said, "I have forgiven that person and will not hold it against them," and held out that space for us to come to Him in humility and to ask for forgiveness and grace and mercy. You with me so far?

Then, Paul has the audacity to say, this is how God did it for you, so that's how you do it for others. And it all dovetails into that statement that Jesus will make. And I will be honest, it's one of those hard ones. It's a tough statement to make. Verse 23: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you." We're back to the parable of the unforgiving servant. "And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers until he should pay all his debt," which he never will, six billion dollars worth of debt. "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you if you do not forgive your brother with all of your heart." And that's not the only place in Scripture that Jesus says something like that. In Matthew 6:14 [Scripture reading]. Now, look, this is one of those things where you read in the biblical theology and what you read in the Bible (and what I have in my mind is systematic theology) that kind of come into conflict. Because I'm the kind of person who believes that once you're saved, you're always saved, that you can't lose your salvation. But here's what the Bible says, and you can work it out however you want to, and I'll tell you how I work it out, but you are going to have to work it out however you want to. The Bible clearly says, if you don't forgive others, you're not forgiven. If you are nursing a grudge, hell is your destination. Hey, I don't like it either. I didn't write it, I'm just delivering the mail. But that's what the Bible says. Now I think, very clearly (and here is how I work it out and I could be totally wrong), but I think that those people who nurse grudges their entire life never really understood the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ. How could they?

When I first came to know the Lord I worked for a gentleman, and he kind of hired me and he was witnessing to me. At the time I wasn't saved when I worked for him. And I worked for him for a sum of money and I was supposed to do some telemarketing outreach. And I stink at telemarketing. It was awful. And so he gave me this sum of money and said work it out with these hours. And I would get so discouraged about halfway through the day that I just quit. And after I came to Christ I realized that was wrong. There was a whole half a day that I wasn't doing anything that he paid me for. And so I kind of calculated the amount of money and I wrote him a letter and I just said, "I'm so sorry. Will you please forgive me? Here's how much I believe that I owe you because I just got so discouraged that I just quit." And I didn't hear anything for like six months. And then, then I got this card

from him in the mail. And it said, “I saw your letter. I happened to put it on the mantle and it fell behind the chair. I didn’t see it for six months. I’m now seeing it.” And the check was torn up! And he said to me, “A much bigger debt has been forgiven me, go in peace!” That’s the grace and the love of the Lord Jesus Christ working in that man’s heart. It’s a person who understood that cross. He understood that picture when God had given him the ability to see what was always there, which is this beautiful picture of the mercy and grace and forgiveness of the Lord Jesus Christ towards us. He realized that if he understood that in its fullness, there is no possible way that he could nurse a grudge against another. That he could hold something else against another. That he could withhold forgiveness from another person. He couldn’t do it. And brothers and sisters in Christ, it’s time for you to let it go today!

There is nothing more toxic to your soul, and nothing that puts you at greater odds with your Savior, than holding on to what you’re holding onto right now in that unforgiveness. It puts you exactly at cross-purposes with what God has done for you. It is wholly inconsistent with the one who loved you as a lost sheep, who came to get you while you were disobeying him. And I’m just going to pray today that you let it go, that you leave it right here in this room. I am begging you. Leave it here! That doesn’t mean you have to trust untrustworthy people. That doesn’t mean you have to be in relationships with abusive people. That doesn’t mean you that have to put yourself in the company of those who do you harm. Jesus knew what was in a man’s heart and there are some people he never entrusted to himself. I get that. But that one person that you think ill of all the time, that you always talk negative about, that you never talk positive about, that one person who has hurt you so badly that you don’t think you can let it go—you have to. And you have to do it today, and not because I said so, because it doesn’t matter what I think, but because that’s what He did for you. And He had every right. He had every right to hold a grudge against you because of what you’ve done. But instead He bled and He died and He came to get you!

Looking for Moses and Elijah (Malachi 4:4-6) by "Pastor Paul"

What does it mean to have the great and terrible day of the Lord? If you're looking down range and you see a mountain there, you probably know that there is another mountain beyond it which you can't see. But if he's pointing you that direction, you go to the one that's next, and so when we get to the next mountain, the coming of Jesus the Messiah, Peter says this is the Day of the Lord and indeed it is, it doesn't mean that there's not a further day, the Day of Judgment down range. You can see it when you get to that mountain. This mountain top place that we're looking, this is on the arch taking us from the beginning, from creation to the Messiah. Malachi, the person ("My Messenger" is his name, from God) wrote during the return, remember, a hundred years or so after the temple was rebuilt and the wall was rebuilt. The question at this point is we have no king, we are being ruled by Persia. Where is a king? There was a promise in the prophets that God would send to David—David's called a prophet in the book of Acts—David, from your body, from your DNA, is going to come the eternal king. It's going to come from your household and your body. They're asking the question now. David's been dead for many centuries. Where is the king? There's a sharpened focus on who we are, why we survived. This is the Jewish people asking these questions. And what do the Law and the prophets mean? Where is the coming king?

We want to begin our look today from this mountain, we want to look back where we came from a bit so we're going to look at the Law, first of all. There's a mysterious happening at the very beginning of creation. A few generations into humankind a man named Enoch, Genesis 5, and he was the father of Methuselah, and the grandfather of Noah. Those are three important good guys. It says, let me back up here and I'll just read this. Genesis 5:24: "And Enoch continually walked with God, then he was not there, because God took him." Now this is already in the Bible, the second note of hope after the Fall in Chapter 3 because at the end of Chapter 3, it says that the seed of the woman is going to be in a war with the seed of the serpent and is going to be victorious even though it will be at a terrible cost. Now it says that death—there's a way around death. It's by God's grace. It's God's redemption. But it's possible, because death at this point seems very heavy, and dark, and there all the way through this genealogy, it says at the end of each article for Adam, for Seth and all their sons, "And he died." What? This thing that God had promised, that if you take from this Tree of Good and Evil, you're going to die. That is coming true, but there's a small exception, and so we'll take it as a mystery for now.

Let's move to the middle of the Law, or should I say actually, near the end. It's in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy means the second telling of the Law. Moses is an old man. He's been leading the children of Israel throughout the desert for these forty years, and he's writing down now his perspective after having watched the children of Israel for forty years, after receiving the Law from God at Sinai. God says to Moses in Chapter 18:18: "I will raise up a prophet like you (Moses) for them from among their brothers." There's this promise of somebody like Moses, of his stature, then at the very last verse of Deuteronomy. Somebody from a long time later, probably one of these prophets from the school of prophets in the exile perhaps or in the return, says in chapter 34:10, "There has not risen again a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom *Adonai* knew face to face." There has not risen again a prophet in Israel like Moses, and we've seen a lot of prophets. We've seen great prophets, Isaiah, Daniel, Jeremiah, all those guys, but there has not risen again a prophet in

Israel like Moses whom the Lord knew face to face. It says in another place in the Law that Moses was the prophet that didn't have dreams and visions. He talked to God from across the table in the tent of meeting. God says he is going to send someone like that, somebody that big. This voice from later says this at the end of Deuteronomy 35:10, because we know this, we know there hasn't been a prophet like Moses because we've been looking for one for a long, long time. The question is, since we've been looking all this time, what do we do in the meantime while we're waiting for this prophet like Moses?

The answer comes on the next page in the first chapter of Joshua where God tells Joshua, look you're coming after Moses, those are big shoes to fill. You're not the next Moses, but you have a job to do. You're the military commander that is going to take these people into that land. He says if you want to be successful, here's what you do. You meditate on my Law day and night and you'll be successful. That's what he says. That's an important point.

Moving from the time of the Law into the time of the prophets, most of the way through the time of the kings and the prophets, to 2 Kings, and we meet a man named Elijah. Second Kings 2:11: "Behold, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven." What does that story remind us of? Genesis 5, Enoch. Does it mean that was Elijah back there? Don't know, doesn't tell us. But it's the first time we've seen that happen since then, since the beginning, and now someone else just gets taken out of life without passing through death. Gets a free ride, what a guy. Elijah did not write a book that's in the Bible. He wrote a short couple of paragraphs through a king that are recorded for us in the book of Chronicles but that's all the writing we have from him. It's a reminder of a place we've been before, back in the beginning.

Now we come to our verse, Malachi 3:23, "Behold, I am going to send you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of *Adonai*." Elijah, he's an important guy that we need to pay attention to.

After Malachi it's a couple of centuries, three centuries perhaps until we meet the New Testament characters and we begin getting the Gospels written down. I've picked out something from all four of the Gospels just to show you that this isn't some random idea. The angel visiting John the Baptizer's father before John was born, he was visiting Zachariah the priest, his dad, John's dad. He says to him, Luke 1:17, "And he (John) will go before Him (Jesus) in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of father to the children." He's quoting Malachi. "And the disobedient ones to the wisdom of the righteous to make ready for the Lord a prepared people." John, when he grew up, he didn't fully understand the significance of his own role, but Jesus clarified it for him and everyone else. In the Gospel of John, John goes out of his way to show Jesus doing what Moses did, feeding the six thousand like Moses fed them with bread from heaven. They asked him, "Are you greater than Moses?" because he gave us bread from heaven. And Jesus said, "I am the bread from heaven." I am the actual sustenance of God. Jesus is in that place. He is in the role of Moses. He is the prophet and a whole lot more. In Chapter 1:19, this is John the Baptizer's testimony. It's John the apostle who's writing it down late in the first century. This is John's testimony, "When the Judean leaders sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you John?' he openly admitted and did not deny. 'I am not the Messiah.' 'What then are you, Elijah?' they asked him. 'I am not,' said John. 'Are you the prophet?' 'No,' he answered." You see they knew who they were looking for. They knew from Malachi and from Deuteronomy. They said to him, "Well, who are you? Give us an

answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said." Those sent were from the Pharisees. They asked him, "If you're not the Messiah, Elijah, or the prophet, why are you immersing? Why are you baptizing people?" "I baptize in water," John answered. "Among you stands one you do not know. My cousin Jesus coming after me, whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." John is very clear about this connection with Elijah and Moses.

Matthew tells us, Matthew has already shown us Jesus teaching the sermon on the mountain. And he puts it on a mountain so that we know that Jesus is teaching. He goes through the Law, and he's acting in the role of Moses, as Matthew has laid it out. Jesus taught that you have heard it said, "Thou shalt not kill." He goes on and He's teaching the Law and what it means in the kingdom of heaven. Matthew clearly sees him in that role as well. In Matthew Chapter 11 though, John the Baptizer's disciples have come to Jesus, because John's in prison. He's in Herod's prison, and he's never going to get out alive. He's going to be killed there. Jesus says of John the Baptizer, even though John denied it, "If you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who is to come." In the story that all three of the synoptic gospels have, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the transformation, and they're coming down (in Mark's account), they're coming down the mount of transformation, they're in shock. Mark is probably the Apostle Peter's testimony, written down by Mark. Mark says it this way. Mark 9:4 "Elijah appeared to them with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus." This is quite a little club that they get to observe. These are the three that don't need a shelter. It's Peter, James, and John that need the shelter. A note from Mark or Peter here, he didn't know what to say, because they were terrified. "Then a cloud came over them, and out of the cloud came a voice, 'This is my Son, whom I love.' When they looked around they were alone with Jesus. As they were coming down the mountain, they asked, 'Why must Elijah come first?'" They're asking this in large part because of Malachi. "Indeed Elijah comes first. Elijah has come and they did to him whatever they wanted"—he's talking about his cousin, John the Baptizer—"just as it is written about him."

The two guys come. Two of the guys coming down the mountain, James and John were brothers, and Peter and John best friends. Peter was a good bit older than John but they were all together in the fishing business before they started following Jesus and they were always together. In John's Gospel every time you hear about Peter he's with John. These two were the first of the twelve to run to the tomb, when they got the news from the women who were the first to the tomb, and the first to see Jesus. When John got there, he says in his Gospel that he believed before he saw the risen Lord Jesus. He believed when he saw the death wrappings on that stone slab. He believed because a week prior he had seen Jesus raise Lazarus and somebody had to help him get those wrappings off, so whoever was in those wrappings wasn't going to just struggle his way out of them. Whoever it was came up through them and so he says he believed. John is speaking a lot later when he wrote this Gospel down, and that's one of the human personal things that got him through those years.

Peter wrote a letter years later and tells what got him through. Second Peter, Chapter 1:16 [scripture reading]. Peter, right after the resurrection, I would imagine, was a wreck. He had denied the Lord. I can't even imagine how he felt when Jesus just showed up in the room resurrected, because there was this thing between them that Jesus knew about. Jesus had prophesied and it had happened. Jesus resolved that with Peter. "Peter, do you love me?" Three times he asked him that by the Sea of Galilee, so that Peter can respond

rightly three times in place of the three denials he had made. Peter has heard all this, has received the Holy Spirit, but on a personal human level he says years and years later that it was seeing Moses and Elijah with Jesus and hearing the voice of God, like the people of Israel heard the voice of God at Sinai, that personally carried him all these years. Jesus was the point of Moses and Elijah coming and will be again.

It's at the end of the New Testament in Revelation. It tells us of a rather strange, mysterious thing. It began in Genesis with a mysterious man who was taken up into heaven, Enoch, and it ends with two witnesses. Revelation Chapter 11:3-6 [Scripture reading]. People he holds in high esteem. Who does that sound like? Elijah made the rain stop in the days of Ahab. That's his miracle, if you will. "They have the power over the waters to turn them into blood." Who did that? Moses. "And to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they wish." Who brought the plagues upon the nations of Israel or Egypt? Moses. Maybe it's those guys. Who else would it be? Revelation 11:11-12 [Scripture reading]. Have we heard this before? Yes, we have. This may be the second or third time for Elijah taking that ride up to the heavenly places. All this, before King Jesus comes at that next mountain, down range. King Jesus comes. He judges the earth, and he reigns over all of us here. This has been a mountain top view from Malachi. It's important to get this look once in a while.

Are you watching and waiting for these two witnesses, for Moses and Elijah again? They're going to show up before the coming of that terrible Day of Judgment when the Lord judges all but saves his people. Remember from the book of Malachi when in the third chapter, when it began. It said, "I am sending Malachi," I'm sending my messenger and he's going to go before my messenger of the covenant who was Jesus. John the Baptizer and Jesus and guess who is his messenger now? It's us. We are Malachi, we are my messenger, the Lord says. May the Spirit of Jesus be strong in each one of us. May we be his messengers to the world around us, knowing that even though we're in the valleys between those great mountain peaks and it's hard to see where we are sometimes, we're on the path, we're on the narrow pathway that he has set us.

A Prayer for Unity (John 17:20-26) by "Pastor Quentin"

Jesus prays here three times. He prays specifically, he prays for unity, for oneness among his disciples. See how this prayer is broken up. The first five verses, Jesus prays for himself to be glorified. And then in verses 6-19, he prays for the immediate disciples, but what He prays for them also applies to us. Then verses 20-26, he prays specifically for us, for you and me, for those who will believe in his gospel, believe in him through the message of the disciples who were with Him, through the New Testament message of the gospel.

Jesus here is praying specifically for us, but he prays three times in this prayer for oneness, for unity. And when there is emphasis like this in one portion of Scripture, you know it's important. You know it's part of the heartbeat of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ that his people would live as one. And so, look at verse 11, Jesus says, "And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one." He prays in verse 11 for oneness among his disciples. But then in verses 20-23 he prays twice, again, for oneness, for you and I. Look at verse 20, He says, "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me." Jesus, here in this prayer, prays three times for his disciples, then, for all future disciples, including us, that we would all live as one.

And notice how he speaks of this unity—one as the Father and the Son are one. "Just as you are in me." He is talking about the Father. "And I in you, that they may be in us." And then He says, "One as we are, I in them and you in me." Jesus is praying for his people to be one, to live as one, as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one. Do you realize how mind boggling that is? God, creator, one God, three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, has lived eternally in community with himself, loving the Father and the Son and the Spirit loving one another, living as one unified God, with a purpose to glorify himself by saving a people for Himself. Jesus is praying that we would live one as our triune God is one. That's mind boggling!

If you spend any time reading your New Testament, you know that much of the Christian life, maybe all of the Christian life, is living out of what is already true of us. So already our sins are forgiven. And isn't our struggle to live as forgiven people? And isn't our struggle to forgive others, even though we've already been forgiven? We've already been adopted into God's family. But one of our biggest problems is that we live like orphans, rather than living in the care of our loving Father. Already we have been set apart and secure in the love of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. But we often doubt his love, don't we? One of our problems is living the Christian life according to what is already true of us. And the same is true for unity. The same is true for oneness. For God's people to live as one, we need to understand that we are already united to Christ, united to the Triune God, and that one of the main things that Christ wants for his people is for us to live consistently with what is already true.

So, first, we need to understand that we are united to Christ. We are united *in* and *to* the Lord Jesus Christ. We are united *in* and *to* the Triune God in heaven, the Creator and

sustainer of all things. The moment that you trust that Jesus is your Lord and Savior, that he saved you from your sins and gives you eternal life through his work on the cross and resurrection, you are united to him, never to be separated. It's not a subjective thing but an objective reality. It's the truth, whether you feel it or not. And this is good news! Because we often don't feel it, do we? We often don't feel like we're inseparably united to God through Jesus Christ, never to be lost, never to be cast away. We often don't feel it. Our emotions in life can feel out of sync with what we read and think about and know to be true from God's work. Right? I mean, that's my life. I'm assuming it's yours, too. Often our head and our heart live out of sync with what's true of us. But we—if you have trusted Christ, you are in Christ and he is in you, by his Spirit, sealed forever.

We just want to step back and think about what it means to be united to Christ. One of my favorite theologians of the past, Louis Berkhof, had just a very good, concise definition of what it means to be united to Christ. He says, "The union may be defined as that intimate, vital and spiritual union between Christ and his people, in virtue of which He is the source of their life, and strength, their blessedness and salvation." If Pastor Quentin could say it his way, we're united in Christ in such a way that anything good that we have comes from him. Everything good we have comes from him. This union is a mysterious union. It's a spiritual union. Even the authors of the New Testament had a hard time explaining it, so they illustrated it in different ways. They illustrated the believers union with Christ by vine and branches in John 15. We've seen that, a building and foundation, in Ephesians 2 and 1 Peter, a marriage, God created marriage, a covenant between man and woman, where they become one flesh, is a picture of the gospel and the union we have in Christ, and head and body. We are so united to Christ that we are called "the Body of Christ." He is the head. He is in charge. He directs where we will go, but we are his body. This is a supernatural, spiritual reality we enter into the moment we trust Christ and the Spirit baptizes us into the body of Christ. Paul says it like this in 1 Corinthians 12, "For just as the body is one, and has many members." He's been talking about the gifting God has given the church. We are one body but we have different gifts. "And all the members of the body, though many, are one body. So it is with Christ, for in one spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit." We were all baptized by the Spirit of Christ the moment we believed. Not sometime later, the moment we believed. Paul says it this way in Ephesians 4, "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called." So he is saying I want you to live, according to what's already true of you, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope, that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all and in all." You notice the *one*: one Lord, one faith, one baptism—united.

If you are a Christian, you are a part of the body of Christ, that body that transcends race, culture, socioeconomic levels, time, space. But this body of Christ is lived out in local congregations. This is the background of Christ's prayer for us to live as one. This is what we've got to get as the foundation of our oneness, to live out among each other. And you know why we're told why Jesus is praying for this? There's probably a lot of different reasons, but we're told specifically here the purpose why Jesus is praying—that his believers, his people, his sons and daughters would live as one, and it's that the world may

believe in him. Look at what He says in verses 21-23. He prays that [Scripture reading]. You hear that, the Father loves us like he loves the Son. But if Jesus is praying that we would live as one, so that the world may believe in Jesus Christ and may know that God the Father sent him, that's the purpose. That's the purpose Jesus is praying for his people to live as one, so that the world, so more individuals will enter the kingdom of God, more individuals would become a part of the body of Christ, because, if you notice in the high priestly prayer, and also in the upper room discourse, we talk about the persecution of the world, right, the hatred of the world. Jesus says, I'm not praying for the world. I'm praying for my people. But He's praying for his people so that more people out of the world will become his people. It's not this stagnant thing of, there's believers in the world and we're here. Nobody from the world's going to come in. No, he's praying so that his people, who have been given from the Father to the Son, would come out of the world, in faith. This is the purpose. Christ is praying specifically for his disciples to be one, to live out in real, tangible ways, what is already true of them, that they are one. And this is done in the local body of Christ, the local church.

Now there's a problem here, a big problem! What do you think about when you think about the church? What do your neighbors think about when they think about the church? Do they think of a people who live as one? Do you think of the church as a people who live as one? Probably not! You think about that old church you grew up in and the church split, it happened because Matilda wanted red carpet, and Abe wanted blue carpet, and they built their factions together and some of them left and started a church. Or whatever the stupid arguments may be, because there are a lot of stupid church arguments, aren't there? If you've been in church any period of time, you know that's true. But I'm afraid, typically when we think about unity in the church, we think it's not existent. We think of church fights, church splits, people leaving because something was said that hurt their feelings. Or something was not said. Or the COVID protocols were all off, right? You know how many people left churches over the last two years, some rightfully so in some places? When you think there's a disruption going on all over, there's a problem. Churches don't often live as one, as unified. It's just a reality, and part of that reality is because we are sinful people. And we don't depend on the Holy Spirit, and we don't live out of love for one another.

But I was saying to [name of church member] this morning, I read a quote, and I'll mention it another time, from a great book. But one of our problems is, when we think about church unity, and unity in the body of Christ, we think too big, too broad, too global. And that might sound weird to you. But what can happen is we can think about churches out there and Christians out there and long for whatever is going on out there, instead of what's going on in here. So, as someone once said, everyone wants to save the world, but no one want's to help mom with the dishes. We want unity, but the question we have to ask is what are we doing to play our part in the local congregation? We are a part of our unity, alright? Because we can talk about, "Oh, if Christians were just united. If there weren't so many Methodists and Baptists and Congregationalists and all these splits and different emphases, we'd be all right." But the question is what are we doing locally? It's easy to talk about Christian unity in big groups. It's easy to come together in big groups, isn't it? You know those events. Maybe some of you went to Promise Keepers back in the day or another big Christian group, and you know, it's great. It can be a blessing, right? But it's easy, because you clock out at the end of the conference. Maybe you met some new Christian

brothers and sisters and it's great. And I'm so thankful for some of these things. But it's easy. You clock out. The real test is what we are doing locally. What are we doing in our local body of Christ? We certainly should have fellowship with Christians beyond these four walls. We need it more than ever! We ought to be joining and locking arms with like-minded believers all over this region and land. We really should be. But we don't need to do it at the expense of doing it here. It's a both/and not an either/or. God has placed you here, and he wants you to live out this oneness here with each other.

So, how do we do that? How do we live out this reality that Christ is praying for us? Well, first we have to understand that we are united to Christ. Secondly, we have to be in a place and committed to a place—not just in theory, but all in. And so I want to look at a couple things. How do we do this? First and foremost, I want to talk about four things we have to be united around to have the oneness Christ talks about here. These are four things I want for our church and every church.

First we have to be united in Christ. We have to be united in Christ. The Christian confession is Jesus is Lord. Christ is ruling and reigning. He died for our sins. He rose from the dead. He's seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will return. This is first and foremost where we must be united around Christ. Or you could say it this way. We have to be united around the gospel. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 [Scripture reading], and then he goes on to talk about these others that Jesus appeared to. Paul says the first importance for us to be united around is the reality that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried, and He was raised from the dead. That's the gospel. We must start there. You can be a church member your whole life. We must believe, trust that Jesus is Lord and Savior. This is first and foremost what makes us a Christian, what unites us to the body of Christ, what seals our union with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit and each other. Now this should go without saying, but I'm going to say it anyway. You cannot have Christian unity, unless you are a Christian. You guys didn't know I was coming out with some profound stuff today, did you? You cannot have Christian unity unless you are a Christian. And this begins with being born again, trusting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We must begin with being united to Christ.

Secondly, we must be united in the truth. Truth is fundamental to everything. If you don't have the truth, you have nothing. And so this is why, kids, listen up, a question you should begin asking everywhere, all the time, is this: Is what I'm hearing true? Is this true? You should ask it at church. You should ask it at home. You should definitely ask it at school. Is this true? Is this the truth? Because without the truth, we have nothing. Truth is like gravity. Because, here's the thing, at the end of the day, gravity always wins. Now we might defy gravity for a little while. We might hop in an airplane, fly from one coast to the other. But one way or another, that plane is coming down. Hopefully on its wheels on a landing strip, but gravity will always win, always! Truth is the same thing. It always wins. It will always win because truth is rooted in God. We can defy it, we can deny it, and it may appear for a period of time that things are going well when we're living outside of the truth. But it will come back and bite you! Because truth always wins, every single time. And if there is one thing our culture needs to hear right now, it's this. We live in world full of propaganda and lies. And one of the main ways a church is to live in the world, as a city on a hill, is to be a place that is about the truth in everything. This is why Paul said in 1Timothy: "I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things, so that if I delay you may know how to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and

buttress of the Truth." Christians, of all people, should want to get to the truth of every matter. And we've got to understand that we must be united in the truth as a church, and we must understand that God's Word is the foundation for all other truth claims. This is why Jesus said in this prayer, "Sanctify them in truth. Your word is truth." We must be a people, a church, that is united in the truth.

This is why if you go out today, the front or the back, whichever door it is, there is a plaque that we have. And it reads: "In essentials unity; in non-essential liberty; in all things charity." This was a way of our forefathers and mothers in the faith at this specific church. Now this is an old saying that nobody knows who really said it. Some people say St. Augustine said it, but no one knows for sure. I doubt he did. But it doesn't matter. The truth still stands with the statement. This was a way for our forbearers here to say that they believe that there were essential truths that must be believed or must be united around that make you a Christian or not, either one of Christ's sheep or the world, either light or dark. This was a way for them to say that there were essential truths that must be believed to be a Christian and to be a member of this church. In essentials unity. Oneness in essentials. In non-essentials liberty. In all things charity. It also recognized that there were secondary issues that Christians can disagree on. That there are essentials that we must agree on, but there are secondary issues like baptism, church government, end times theology. There are things we can disagree on and still have unity, right? Hopefully you do this at home. You might agree to disagree on some things, anything of secondary importance. But even though we may disagree on some of these secondary issues, we are still called to be charitable to one another, because we are brothers and sisters.

But there are, don't miss the point, there are essentials, and God's Word is the place where these essentials are laid out. Things like God is creator and judge, Christ as literally taking on flesh and being the God-Man, really crucified and raised literally and physically. Essentials like he will return and judge the living and the dead. Essentials like to be one with Christ involves repentance and faith, a turning from our sin and a turning to Christ. These are essentials. Creeds like the Apostles' and the Nicene Creed summarize these essential truths for us. These are short statements of faith that summarize the essentials that Christians of every stripe have agreed to and agreed on that God's Word speaks to. And while we certainly need to believe more than the Apostles' Creed and more than the Nicene Creed, we need not to believe less. Because if we believe less, we might be a lot of things—nice person, good neighbor, good co-worker—but a Christian we are not. Maybe even a church member, but if you believe less than these creeds, a Christian you are not.

And this is where we have to say division is not always a bad thing. Division over essentials is a good thing, because if we are not united around essential truths of the gospel, essential truths of God's Word, we're not united. How can you have unity with someone who says, "I don't believe Jesus is really the only way. I don't believe he really rose from the dead?" What kind of unity can you have with that? And I'm talking Christian unity in the context of the local body. You can have unity like a friend in town, unity on boards in town, unity in other ways, but not Christian unity. Going back to that profound statement, to have Christian unity you have to be a Christian. And to be a Christian you have to believe some essential things. We're going to talk about this a little more in a couple weeks. But there are a lot of so-called churches, you see them, you know them, and denominations that have abandoned the essentials and therefore they have abandoned Christ. We are not to have any unity with them because there can't be any, can't be any. This is why Paul says in 2

Corinthians, "Do not be unequally yoked to unbelievers. For what partnership can righteousness have with lawlessness or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What accord can Christ have with the law, or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God, and as God said, 'I will make my dwelling among them, and walk among them. I will be their God and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst and be separate from them, says the Lord and touch no unclean thing. Then I will welcome you and I will be a Father to you and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.'" We must be united in essentials as a local church, and any other church or denomination we would partner with, because if you are not united on the essentials, you're not united—period, end of story. And any place that would affirm anything that God says is sin and say you don't need to repent of this is not someone you can have fellowship with, because they have denied the essentials of the gospel. And one of the main essentials of the gospel is we must turn from our sin to Christ for forgiveness. Now you know, I say this all the time, as believers this doesn't mean we don't sin anymore. We still struggle with those sins we've repented of, don't we? Daily! This isn't to say there isn't a struggle, but we must be united around essential truths of the faith. Have to be united in Christ, united in truth. And guys, we have our work cut out for us in this culture. And you better start teaching your kids and grandkids to ask the question, what is true? Because they are being lied to and propagandized at every turn in our culture. And you can mark my words in fifteen or twenty years, there are going to be a lot of children who were lied to and who will have their lives ruined because of lies. We must be about the truth as a church, as families. We must be about the truth of the gospel.

Next we need to be united in love—love of God and love for one another. Now this is where it gets hard. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:1-4 [Scripture reading]. If you want to know what love is, here you go, 1 Corinthians 13:4-13 [Scripture reading]. Everyone's favorite wedding passage, right? But this should be put on our minds and in our hearts of how to live as a united body of Christ at [name of church] or wherever we find our church home. Love is patient and kind. Are we patient and kind? It does not envy or boast. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. This is what we are called to, how we are called to live with one another, united in Christ, united in the essentials. And within that and under that and through that, we live loving one another, loving one another. Imagine if churches all over the land—and many are, and many of you are—imagine though if this is what people thought of when they thought of a church. Man, those people, they're kinda weird in what they believe, but man, they love each other. I know that! They take care of one another. They look out for one another, and when they don't they actually ask for forgiveness from one another. Let's be honest, listen, if you're going to live united, you're going to do some stupid things with one another. You're going to be arrogant and rude. You're going to insist on your own way at times. I'm going to! And there are going to be times when we need to ask for forgiveness from one another. This is what love is, because we're a family. We're brothers and sisters, united in Christ, united in the truth, and united in love.

And lastly, we're united in purpose. Two things under this, united in purpose: worship of God, and gospel and kingdom advancement. This is our purpose here, to worship God. That's what we're called to do. This is what our whole life is about, what we

are here for, to worship God. This is our greatest and highest privilege, because one day in the new heavens and the new earth we will live in a state of worship. Let's start practicing now. Really! I mean Sunday morning is a time for us to gather corporately. We are called to live lives of worship individually, in our home, but there is something that happens here that's a little slice, a little taste of heaven. Because guess what, when I'm singing hymns in my car, trust me, it's not the same. When we come together, we gather as a choir of people to worship God, to hear from his Word, to fellowship with one another, and this continues on through the week. We are called and united in one purpose to worship God. That is what we are here for.

But we are also here—Jesus said the purpose was so that the world may know, that the world may believe. Our secondary purpose as we worship God is the advancement of the kingdom of God. We want to see the kingdom of God grow beyond these four walls. We want to see our friends and our neighbors come to know Christ to enter his kingdom, to leave the world of darkness and enter the kingdom of light. This is what we are here for. This is why God has us here. We have friends and neighbors who are hungry for the truth, who are lost and headed for an eternal separation from God and, guys, we have the key. We have the hope.

Everything we do together as a church must come back to these two things. How does it help us worship God? And how does it help us to advance the kingdom? This goes for everything—flea market, giving to crisis pregnancy center, any and everything we do. We need to ask how does this help and advance the worship of God through Jesus Christ? And how does it advance his kingdom? And it may not even be a gospel event. It might just be an event where you're giving cold water to people who need it, sowing seeds, having a flea market. Having a table where people can talk and pray, whatever. Everything we do as a church needs to come back to these two realities. How does it help us worship God? And how does it help us advance his kingdom? That's what we're here for.

And so in closing, to have a good marriage takes work, sacrifice, and understanding. The same is true for the church. For any church to live in the oneness Christ prays for will take work, will take sacrifice, and will take understanding, as we are united in Christ, united in the truth, united in love, and united in purpose. Let's set out to be that kind of church, a church that is united in Christ. We love to sing of his praises. We love to speak of Christ. A church that is united in the truth. We are on a pursuit for truth, with God's Word as our foundation. United in love. Let's love one another, care for one another. Guys, you're going to get on each other's nerves. I'm going to get on your nerves. I might be on your nerves right now. "I wish he'd hurry up." This is what family life is like. It's messy. But let's live united in love, and let's live in a united purpose to worship God and take his gospel to the world. And let's pray that the Holy Spirit would strengthen and enable us to live this way with each other, and to live this way before God and our neighbors. And Lord willing, we will see our friends, our neighbors, and our coworkers come and say, "Can you give me the reason for the hope that's within you?" Let's pray to that end.

I Got to Talk to You About Gossip (Various Scriptures) by "Pastor Rafael"

Winston Churchill exemplified integrity and respect in the face of opposition. During his last year in office, he attended an official ceremony. Several rows behind him, two gentlemen began whispering, "That's Winston Churchill. They say he's getting senile. They say he should step aside and leave the running of the nation to a more dynamic and capable man." When the ceremony was over Churchill turned to the men and said, "Gentlemen, they also say he's dead." So while this is not a biblical story, it's a story where we have a biblical lesson that we can and that we should learn, that we must learn from it. Again, as I said today, we are going to be talking about the topic of gossip today.

So you say, "Listen, we have heard this message today." Now listen, I told a pastor friend of mine who said, "I'm going to listen to Sunday's message and I'm going to quiz you about it. I'm going to ask you about it." And I said, "Oh dear God, no." And I told him some of the things that were going to come up in the message and I almost felt like they were like, "Are you sure?" And I'm like, listen, I've always been able to say some hard things to our church family because it doesn't come from any other place other than love, alright? But this is something that has been bothering me and something I need to make sure that I say, because, yes, you have heard this message before. Maybe you remember that it was [name of church elder] who preached this message maybe two months ago or so, but I have learned two things since I've been gone on vacation. You ready? Number one, if pastor Rafael's not here, apparently, it's optional Sunday, right? So, a lot of times, people are like, "Rafael, don't tell people you're leaving, because they won't come to church." I'm like, "I have faith in them. I'm going to tell them I'm going on vacation." And then all of a sudden we hit some record low. Then number two is that if it's not Rafael who's up here preaching, then we decide whether we want to accept what is being taught as biblical or not and we kind of decide whether we want to apply it to our lives or not. What I need you to realize that if somebody is up here, no matter who they are, I have complete and utter faith in them that God is going to use them and that they are going to bring something to us that we need. So why do I say that, alright? Because I think that again that people will not attend if I'm not here or will not listen or apply biblical principles, if I'm not the one saying it, and again that may not be the case. That's just how I feel.

So today I want to try to define gossip properly and talk about how to biblically deal with it. Let me begin by stating that I as your pastor am not perfect when it comes to gossip. If somebody says, "Did you hear?" My first intention is not, "Get away from me, Satan." My first reaction is, "I did not." Let's be honest, right? Because it goes against who we are as humans, right? As being made out of flesh, right? My first intention is not to say, "No," but rather, "What happened?" But what we will see today is that our first, second, and third option should not be the option of us saying, "Please tell me more. Who did you hear this from? How did it come about?" Because the Bible says in Proverbs 20:19, "He who goes about as a talebearer, he who goes about as a gossip, reveals secrets. Therefore do not meddle with him who flatters his lips." In his letter to the Romans, Paul equates gossipers to the following. Listen, Romans 1:30, alright? Gossipers are in the same line as "slanderers, God haters, insolent, proud, boastful, inventors of evil things, and disobedient toward parents." You say "Well, I was just repeating what I heard." Okay, but now you're a God-hater, insolent, proud, boastful, and inventor of evil things! Paul even tried to stop gossiping in Timothy's church. So, yes it's been going on for quite some time. Look at 1

Timothy 3:11. “Likewise, their wives must be serious, not slanderers, sober and faithful in all things.” First Timothy 5:13: “Besides that, they learn to be idle and not only idle wandering around from house to house, but also gossips and busybodies saying what they ought not.” As you see, gossip, rumors, tail bearing, and slanderers were in the New Testament church, and are a problem right now.

So, what exactly is gossip? It’s a person who habitually reveals personal or sensational facts about others, a rumor or report of an intimate nature or chatty talk. So notice how gossip is not just revealing personal and sensitive information but it’s also spreading a rumor. Some of us would say, “Well it’s not gossip if what we are sharing is factual,” right? Some of us try to find our way around that to make light or to make acceptable that which I hear, that which I am doing, right? We may say that we heard it from the source but no matter what, it’s still gossip and here’s the one thing that comes back to me. Are you ready? If I’m upset at someone, instead of going to that person, I’m going to vent to someone about it.

So, what happens is this, you ready? Here’s what happens. I’m upset at [name of church elder] for whatever reason it is, and instead of me going to [name of church elder] and letting him know, “[name of church elder], I’m upset with you. This really bothers me and I just need to get this out in the open because it’s eating me up alive.” Let me tell what I do. [Rafael approaches a different church member and role plays an interaction.] “How am I doing? So, so, I’m upset, a little upset, you know. I mean, have you seen anything wrong with [name of church elder]? Have you seen him doing this, like some awkward things? I mean I’m not gossiping. I’m just literally just letting you know how I feel because it’s bothering me inside and I got to get it out, right? There’s literally like he doesn’t pay attention to me anymore. He doesn’t call me anymore. I thought we were friends and it’s just like now it’s like I feel like I’ve been replaced. You know what I’m talking about? And who knows maybe he’s doing that to you. Crickets right? And I get it that before it used to be his work. But now he’s got a good job and you know he’s got more hours and I hear less from him. Should I be upset?” And then I let this person give me advice on what they think and a lot of times it’s a friend that I’m going to. You know what they’re going to say? “[name of church elder]’s a jerk. You deserve better than him because he’s not paying attention to you. You know what? You go find yourself another person for your leadership team. I’m just saying.”

So that’s what we do. We complain to somebody else about it and what we’re doing is we are gossiping. And it could be that I’m wrong and it could be that he’s just really busy. Does that make sense? But when I do not go to him, the person that I have a problem with, and go to anybody else, I am now starting and stirring the rumor slash gossip mill. Do you see that? Because I am not taking care of it one on one. Because then I bring in [name of church member] and she’s going to be like, “Oh man I had to help a gent with an issue he had with [name of church elder] the other day. Did you know that, [name of different church member]? I didn’t know that. Are you serious?” And then it just runs. Biblically speaking, you are sinning. Not only by gossiping about it and spreading truth and lies but by not doing things biblically. Matthew 18:15 says this: “Now if your brother sins against you go and tell him his fault between you and him alone.” Go and tell him alone. If you have a problem with who? Whoever you have a problem with, you go to him. How? Alone. “If he listens to you, you have gained a brother. But if he does not listen then take with you after

that one or two others that by the testimony of two or three witnesses, every word may be established."

You know what I was reading in my devotions today? That many times when we are mad and we are upset we make up our own story of how we acted and what we said. And I was like, it's so true. Because if you're not paying attention, you might have said something kind of meanly, lets say, but in your story that you're repeating, now you're the saint. "Oh, I never raised my voice. I never said anything of that fact," right? It happens to the best of us. Then it says this: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." And no, it's not talking about prayer. So please stop saying, "Oh well, listen, where two or three of us are gathering, pastor, there he is in the midst of us," because that's not what he's talking about. When you have a conflict, when you are facing a conflict reconciliation, and there's two or three of you, there he is in the midst of that conflict. Do you understand that? Biblically speaking, if you have an issue, you go talk to that person. If you have an issue with [name of church elder], you go talk to him. You have an issue with [name of church member], you have an issue, you go talk to [name of same church member] about it. Guys, I don't want to hear it because my phone literally rang off the hook on vacation about gossip. And can I tell you something? I fell victim to it, because that was what we do! So I called somebody on our leadership team. I'll just say it. I called [name of different church elder]. I was like "I have an issue. I heard this or I heard something that bothered me." And I proceeded to start telling him. He's like, "Hold on a second. Have you talked to this person?" "No." "Then I don't want to hear it." Stopped me, the pastor, dead in my tracks. I don't want to hear it unless you talk with that person. Because you have not talked to that person, I don't care who said it to you, it is gossip. I don't have time for that. That's impressive. Why do I share that with you? Because I'm the pastor and I, you know I fall too.

Let me put one of those things to rest. [Name of church member], can you stand up for me real quick? Do you guys know who [name of church member] is? She is the best, and you know what? She hasn't left the church. If you haven't seen somebody for a couple weeks, you know something called vacation and personal time. All of a sudden it's like, I think [name of church member]'s left the church pastor. No, I just talked to her last week. She's fine. But then all of a sudden that goes around and then nobody knows who she is. But that's gossip, because you haven't reached out, just because you haven't seen her doesn't mean she's no longer here. It just means that you haven't seen her. If that bothers you that you don't see her, you know what really helps? Call on the phone "Hey, [name of church member], how are you? I haven't seen you in a couple weeks. Is there anything I can do for you? Is there anything I can pray with you about?" Right? Because, apparently, her not being here bothered you. Now it should bother you, because three weeks is just too much for next time, even though it's like the first time in like twenty years or however long it's been. It's too much. If that bothered you, please go to her.

Should there still be no change again, if you go to that person and they're like, "I know that I've upset you but I don't care. I know that I've hurt you but I just don't care. Leave me alone," then you go and bring others with you to go talk to them so that the rumor mill doesn't keep going. That so those can verify what is going on. And if they still say, "I don't care. Leave me alone," then you go to the church and then the church will talk to them. If there's still an issue saying, "I don't care if I hurt your feelings," then it says

"treat him as a tax collector." Then it says, okay we'll just, you know, but if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

By contacting someone else and saying that you have a prayer request, it's gossip. "Hey [name of church elder], I got a prayer request. [Name of church leader] has been dealing with a lot of nagging issues lately. But you know what? She's just, bless her heart, I know she tries, but she just keeps nagging and she just won't stop. Can you please pray for her?" Or you go and you say "hey [name of church elder], [name of church member]'s having an issue right now. He just he keeps calling people merman and it's really upsetting and I think he's racist towards fish animals. I think [name of church member] needs to take the plank out of his own eyes." Yes. Some of you know what we are talking about when we say that. But that's what we do and we disguise gossip, and let's be serious, as a prayer request. Because we just want to tell somebody and we want to biblicize it.

Texting someone about an issue that you have is gossiping. Telling anyone about it is gossiping and gossiping doesn't only destroy the credibility of the gossiper but it destroys relationships. Proverbs 16:28: "A perverse man sows strife, and a whisperer separates the best of friends." There is nothing that will break apart a friendship or a family more than gossip. I can't think of anything that will drive a wedge between a Christian and their sister and their brother and their friends than gossip. Proverbs 11:13: "A talebearer reveals secrets, but he who is of a faithful spirit conceals the matter." What you say, what comes out of your mouth matters. Most people think that gossip is normal. It's one of the worst things that can come out of your mouth. It's just idle talk or rumor especially about something personal or something private. You just think, "Hey, it's okay for me to do it. It's okay for me to talk to somebody about it because it's what I do." It's normal and it's accepted by the world as a whole. Matthew 12:36-37 [Scripture reading]. What you say you will have to answer for. That division, that wedge that has caused, you will have to answer for. People's words are what God will use to judge them eventually. Every word spoken reflects your heart.

Have you ever played telephone? How a rumor starts is never how it ends. We had a fire and thought it had died down, but you go out and prod it, and it starts back up again! Just a little stir and it will reignite. Gossip is gossip because one person is allowing it to happen. One person is saying, "Tell me more. What is this you speak of?" It needs at least one person to survive. So stop it in its tracks, and just say "That's none of my business. I don't want to hear this." I don't think that is really hard to say. If there is no one to throw any more wood on it, if there's no one left to stir the charcoal, it will die out. I thought we were all supposed to strive to be Christ-like in everything that we do. I don't think that God is in the business of tearing down lives. He's in the business of making things new. Do you know how gossip can be stopped? Don't listen to it. If you have an issue with someone, go to them.

Have you ever heard of the word "unspoken" when we talk about prayer requests? Do you know what it means? It means I need you to pray for me, but I don't want to say right now what it is, because God knows. If you're having issues with someone, they don't need to know the details. Just pray for the unspoken, and people will pray for that. Otherwise it is all gossip. James 3:5-6 says [Scripture reading]. I have often regretted my speech, never my silence. Ephesians 4:29: "Let no unwholesome word proceed out of your mouth, but only that which is good for building up, that it may give grace to the listeners." Stopping gossip is not easy but it's necessary.

Sometimes we upset people without knowing. Gossip is a sin whether it's fact, fiction, slander, or if you are the teller or hearer of the gossip. It happens at every church, and sometimes people leave the church because of it. Romans 12:2: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." 1 John 1:9: "If we confess or sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Do not allow a person to separate us from walking with God. If you do, you weren't truly following God, but a person. Same thing for a church. If a church can get in between you and God, were you truly following God or seeking the approval of a church or pastor? God is always there for you, but people will fail you. So what do we do when someone says, "Have you heard?" We say, "No! Is this the person it happened to? No? Then stop."

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VITA

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After college, Nathan taught middle school and high school students for three years at Buenos Aires International Christian Academy. He then moved to Texas to attend Dallas Theological Seminary. There he met Zuleika Reyes, another student at DTS who hailed from the Bronx, New York. They were married in 2004. Nathan graduated with high honors from DTS in 2008 with a ThM.

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